

Bulletin of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh

No. 147: July 2003

Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

PROGRAMME

FIELD OUTING: Members willing to take passengers may please contact the following: Shafaat Ulla (23353098) or Siraj Taher (55612608). Seats may be available in members' cars and will be reserved on a first-come-first-served basis. Book early to avoid disappointment.

Sunday, 27-vii-2003: Chilkur Deer Park, Rangareddi District: Route: Mehdipatnam – Artillery Centre Golkonda – on Vikarabad road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.00am. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further information contact Siraj Taher (55612608) or Shafaat Ulla (23353098) before 11am or after 4pm.

INDOOR MEETING: 21-vii-2003, 6pm: Talk and discussion on members' visit to Rollapadu Bustard Sanctuary, by Mr. S. Ashok Kumar. Vidyaranya High School, Opp., Secretariat, Saifabad, Hyderabad.

EDITORIAL

Two developments that occurred in May and June this year auger well for the Society. Sometimes shock therapy wakes up people as nothing else can. Well, this time it happened to the BSAP. The announcement of discontinuation of the monthly Indoor Meetings, owing to poor attendance jolted the members. There was a plethora of comments like "How sad, at least once a month we used to meet – now we cannot do that – how sad" from a very enthusiastic and regular lady member of long standing. While one member was unhappy that instead of "putting our heads together and finding a solution, we have resorted to the 'easy way out'", another was angry – "A thin bulletin (PITTA) once a month and a journal (MAYURA) once a year is not what I would like". Some took it in their stride, but two members came forward and took up the challenge, promising to do their best to put the Indoor Meetings back on the BSAP calendar of events.

The other was the way people rose to meet the challenge of the financial problems that the Society was facing. While there was a generous donation from one member, BSAP received a welcome increase in the corporate membership. In fact, it went up 20 times! The Singareni Collieries Education Society has made 17 schools and 2 colleges under them as our corporate members. The Singareni Collieries Company Ltd. (SCCL) has drawn up a plan to tie up with BSAP to impart education in nature and environmental studies to these schools. Now it is up to us to rise to the occasion and do the best that is required to educate these young people to the best of our knowledge, experience and ability. How we can do it would justify the confidence and expectations that the SCCL has placed on us.

NOTES & NEWS

HAPPENINGS OF THE SOCIETY - FIELD TRIP TO SANJIVAYYA PARK 22-06-2003

By Humayun Taher

The first cool bite of the monsoon was in the air when the members of the Birdwatchers Society of A.P. gathered at Sanjivayya Park on the morning of 22 June for the field trip. It turned out to be a fairly good one.

To start with, activity was low. The most conspicuous birds were the ubiquitous House Crows (*Corvus splendens*). They were in full breeding frenzy all over the park and we counted over 15 active nests. Naturally, all these nests were attractive bait for the Koels (*Eudynamys scolopacea*), which are brood

parasitic on the Crows. At several places, we observed crows chasing the koels, not without reason, I may add.

Continuing along the path, we notched up a few Coots (*Fulica atra*) and Dabchicks (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) on the margins of the Hussain Sagar Lake. Also noticed were a few Little Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*), sitting on the rocks in the water and sunning themselves. They seemed to be enjoying the warmth of the sun. No doubt they found the water a trifle too cold for their liking, augmented as it was with the monsoon showers.

In the park itself, a few Purple Sunbirds (*Nectarinia zeylonica*) attracted attention by chittering around us. And then the first Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) appeared! What

a dazzling sight. A pair, too! Wonderful. Who can fail to be captivated by this brilliantly plumaged bird! Certainly not Shobha, who was most eager to see an Oriole. The bird obliged. In fact, it was rather too obliging and appeared here and there throughout the duration of the birding trip through the park. At one point, we even found its rather neat little home in a Ficus tree, with the hen bird sitting. The cock bird relieved her occasionally, but her idea of relief was confined to a brief aerial sortie, a hasty snack and then return to the domestic chores! A model housewife, this one!

Further up, we encountered the bird we had all come to see! A nesting pair of Pied Mynas (*Sturnus contra*). Now, Pied Mynas were previously not reported from the Hyderabad environs so, when two of our members had reported the sighting on the 1st of this month, from Sanjivayya Park; it was cause for celebration. And now, with a whole crowd of birdwatchers gaping up at them, the pair of birds were seen building their nest. It was not complete and the birds were constantly making trips to the nest with twigs, bits of grass and other odds and ends in their beaks. They were also not very shy and were obviously not greatly disturbed by the motley crowd of birders under their nest tree. Having taken a long and very satisfying look at the busy birds, we continued.

Black Drongos (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) are known for their extreme boldness in the vicinity of their nest. So when we saw one chasing a crow, we were on the alert. It wasn't long before Aasheesh saw the neat little nest, with the bird incubating. Nearby, a Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*) had also built, and was also incubating. Obviously, it meant to profit from the boldness of the Drongo and its ability to keep the crows away! Ashy Wren Warblers (*Prinia socialis*) were also sporting in the bushes nearby, but were far more careful as to the guarding of their nest and we were unable to see one. Doubtless, it is there; but the birds kept their secret well!

Humayun and Nandu, walking ahead, observed a second pair of Pied Mynas, collecting nesting material on the lawns and conveying it to a Ficus tree nearby. Sure enough, a look through the binox revealed a second nest in the making. Here was a gold mine indeed! We had come prepared to see one nest – but a second nest – in the same area! Surely this means that there is a colony in the making. But some worrying thoughts occur at this point – where have the birds shifted from? And why? Are they 'escaped' birds? There is material here for some research on these birds. Anyone out there interested?

On the tree that the Mynas had selected as appropriate for the rearing of their own olive branches, a perky little black and white bird was playing hide-and-seek. No trouble identifying this chap – a male Blackheaded Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina melanoptera*)! On the topmost twig, a Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) hammered away on its anvil and a couple of Hoopoes (*Upupa epops*) also put in an appearance on the trees nearby. Their crests look so comical at the moment of take-off and landing, fully spread out and resembling a rather untidily combed wig, falling forward from the wearer's face...!

On the Hussain Sagar Lake, a flat rock in the water revealed a couple of Indian River Terns (*Sterna aurantia*). A couple of metal structures on the lake had been appropriated by Cormorants which sat very contentedly on these poles. In the park itself, Common Mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*) now appeared, vying with their cousins for our attentions. They were almost successful; only the appearance of the Goldmantled Chloropsis (*Chloropsis cochinchinensis*) defeated them. Ali Saab noticed the bird sitting quietly in the midst of a leafy bougainvillea creeper and the birders flocked around. Rather surprisingly, the bird was most accommodating and just sat there staring at the group with a puzzled look. The splash of purple at the base of the bill looks so wonderful. And surely that green colour would put many a tree to shame!

But now, time is getting on and the day starts to hot up. Someone up there forgot that summer is supposed to be over! We decide to beat a retreat before the Sanjivayya Park canteen decides to serve up fried bird(watchers) for breakfast to anyone interested. En-route a hen Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) decides to show us how she catches squirrels. The only one who does not appreciate the demonstration is the squirrel, and who can blame him! His life is hard enough as it is, without having beastly great hawks stooping at him at every turn. A shrill scream and the squirrel shows us how it escapes from hawks! A moment later, the hawk has disappeared and the squirrel has found something interesting for his nervous stomach!

Meanwhile, the birdwatchers retreat from the scene. The trip revealed 34 species of birds including such interesting ones as the Pied Mynas and the Chloropsis. Altogether a good time, enjoyed by the adults as well as the troop of most enthusiastic youngsters.

Workshop on Building Environment and Forest Protection Programmes

The Singareni Collieries Company Ltd. (SCCL), Khammam District, A.P. organised a half-day workshop in Singareni Bhavan Hyderabad, at 11.00 a.m. on May 24th 2003. The BSAP was invited to participate in this workshop along with the A.P. Forest Department (APFD) and World Wide Fund for Nature – India (WWF), A.P. State office. The objective of this workshop was to obtain inputs from the A.P. State Government (through the A.P. Forest Dept.) and Non-Governmental organisations. Very meaningful and vigorous discussions took place between all the participants on how best to go about achieving the goals envisaged by the SCCL. Some decisions were taken and guidelines put forward, by the APFD, WWF-India and BSAP on the priorities and procedures to be adopted. The Chairman and Managing Director of the SCCL, both in his opening address and concluding remarks was very keen to go ahead upon the programmes agreed upon and assured everyone of all help that may be required. Society members Siraj Taher, S. Ashok Kumar, M. Shafaat Ulla, A.A. Aziz and Kumari Padmaja participated in the workshop and took part in the deliberations.

Books & Journals received

The BSAP reading room received the following books and journals/periodicals during March-June 2003.

Books

1. Khan, M.G. Ali (No date): A Vet in Wilderness. [Complimentary].
2. The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 as Amended by the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2002. Professional Book Publishers, New Delhi. [Donated by Belinda Wright].
3. Javed, Salim & Rahul Kaul (2003): Field Methods for Bird Surveys. Bombay Natural History Society. [Donated by I.B.C.N., B.N.H.S..].

Journals / Periodicals

1. *BirdLife Asia*. Vol. 1. No. 1. December 2002 [Complimentary].
2. *Birdwatcher's Digest*. Special optics issue. Vol. 25. No. 4. March/April 2003. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie].
3. *Hornbill*. January-March 2003. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie].
4. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. Vol. 99. No. 3. 28 February 2003. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie].
5. *Samsad News*. Vol. 21. No. 3. March 2003. [Exchange].
6. *Vihang*. Summer 2003. [Exchange].
7. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 11. Nos. 24, 25, 26. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie].
8. *Suara Enggang*. 2003. No. 2. March-April. [Exchange].
9. *Suara Enggang*. 2003. No. 3. May-June. [Exchange].
10. *World Birdwatch*. Vol. 25. No. 2. June 2003. [Exchange].

A MEMORABLE BIRD QUIZ

By M. Shobha

The pleasant prospect of taking a winged wildlife quiz brought 16 BSAP enthusiasts together on 16 June 2003. Our Quiz Master, Mr. Moorty, came well prepared with question cards for different categories: starters, teasers, stunners, the gamut. And what a commendable range they turned out to be, from English poetry to mythology, from philately to etymology. Mr. Moorty was obviously in his element, as it should be with twenty years of birding under his hat (*a la* his poser to us, "the female of the Pheasant-tailed Jacana species incubates its eggs ...," you guessed it, under its wings!).

And so we focussed our attention on our feathered friends. What is a gizzard? A crop? What is the name of the voice box of birds? What does the term 'nidiculous' describe? According to Mr. Salim Ali, which bird mimics the human voice closest? When does the Black Eagle breed? What is guano? Which bird finds and visits water with astounding accuracy on land?

What makes Guillemots unique among sea birds? (You simply must allow me to let on here that the colour of every clutch of eggs differs from all others, making it easier for the parent Guillemot to identify its nest from amongst a sea of nests). And staying with sea birds, what do baby Herring Gulls have to do to be fed? They have to work on the parent, er ..., tap on the red spots on the sides of the parent's beak! Talking of babies, what is a baby eagle called? 'Aiglet' says our German-speaking Quizzer. 'Eaglet' says French-speaking Kiran. A 'toffee!' – 'no, coffee!' sort of etymological tiff there, what say you? Alcyon is the Greek root for which one of our common birds? Tiercel is Latin for the male Peregrine Falcon, being derived from 'tiercium' meaning 'one-third.' What is so significant about this name? The Tiercel is befittingly named, as it is one-third the size of the female Peregrine Falcon! (*Editor's Note: The Tiercel Peregrine is a third smaller than the female, and not one-third the size.*) What is a 'Lek'? 'Lek' is Scandinavian for 'play' and refers to the display ground for birds in courting time, in case you did not know. 'Aves' is Latin for 'birds'; how does the legend go? It was a firm belief in times gone by that human beings, upon death, turned into birds. The Owl belongs to the order Strigiformes and family Strigidae. Do you know why? Striges is Latin and the plural form of 'Strix' meaning 'witch.' Surely it's the bewitching eyes of the Owl that earned it its unsavoury classification! As if to make up for this misnomer, we have given it the name of not one but two Gods: 'Athena Brahma' *aka* Owl. Which bird is the symbol of the Aztecs? The Owl. Edward Lear immortalized a bird in his nonsense verse "... and the Pussycat went to sea/ In a beautiful pea-green boat." Which bird was it? The Owl again! Who acts as the messenger of Yama? It's the Owl once more. King Solomon, who spoke the language of the birds and beasts alike, and Queen Balkys of Sheba, also chose a bird to be their go-between messenger. Ah-ha, got you there! It is not the Owl this time, but the remarkable Hoopoe.

If bird-dog training goes against your grain, perhaps you would know which species of bird makes for a good, for lack of a better word, watchdog? The Geese – they have a keen sense of hearing and what's more, show aggression by nipping the intruder! Which birds were depicted in the engravings of the Temples of Egypt? The Egyptian Vulture and Pharaoh's Chicken. And which bird is a symbol of 'parental love?' The Indian Griffon (*Gyps fulvus*). The Griffon Vulture, also known as Nekhbet, was the guardian of the King of Egypt. What is the national bird of Guatemala? The Quetzal. Guatemalans chose to name their currency too after this beautiful bird. On the other hand, Liberia issued a stamp in 1920-21, of a 'national bird' that did not belong to Africa, leave alone Liberia. Which one, do you ask? The Great Indian Hornbill!

Pigeons produce crop milk, as do two other species of birds. Which ones? The flabbergasting answer is Flamingoes and Penguins. Painted Storks spread their wings out wide to protect their young from the sun. What else do they do to care for their little ones? They dribble water down their beaks to quench the thirst of their young.

How many eggs of a hen would equal the size of one egg of an Ostrich? Two dozen. Really.

Which bird do the Vedas refer to as "one reared by others?" The Koel. And who plays the Koel's host? The Crow. What is a group of sparrows called? A host of sparrows. A flock of Jays? A party of Jays. A flock of finches? A charm of finches. A flock of Larks? An exaltation of Larks. What better way to round off this report of the quiz, than to hark back to the only question yours truly was able to answer –

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote in high praise of which bird in this famous quote from his poem:

"Hail to thee, blithe spirit!
Bird thou never wert –
That from heaven or near it
Pourest thy full heart
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art."
... "To A Skylark"

BIRDWORD PUZZLE - No. 3

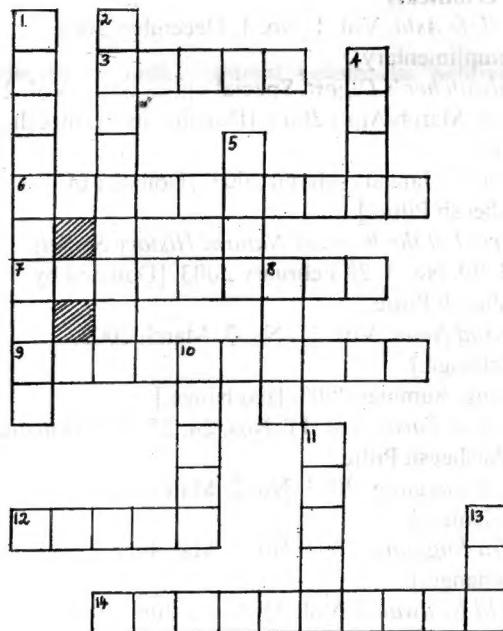
By M.M. Ali Khan

Note: Figures in Brackets denote number of alphabets

The puzzle contains bird names only

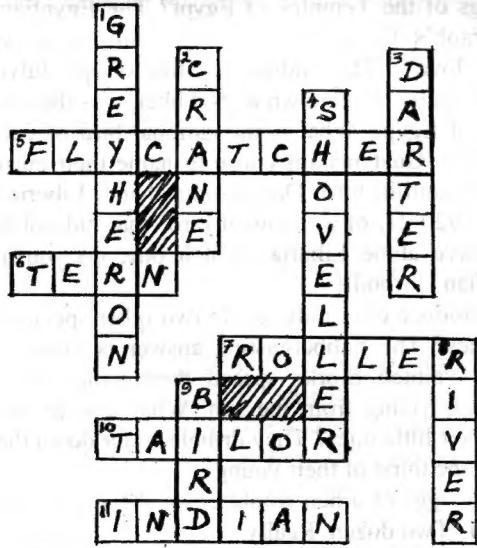
Correct solution to this puzzle will be given in the next issue of PITTA

1. Healthy man of the collar (10)
2. See 10
- 3 & 13. Vase after sunset (5, 3)
4. One may fly it on a string (4)
5. Go to New Zealand to get y our shoe-shine (4)
6. TRIED to GRASP to get a runner (10)
7. Hamelin man on the beach (4, 5)
- 8 & 11. Coconut tree that is fast (4, 5)
- 9 & 12. Baby might fall if she is not careful (4+6, 5)
- 10, 2 & 14. Tiger coloured pest slip-fielder (5, 3+5, 10)



Members are requested to send their solutions to PITTA at the Society address. The correct entries will be entered for a draw. The lucky winner receives a BSAP cap, donated by Mr. M.M. Ali Khan.

Solution to Birdword Puzzle – No. 2



"Psst. Page 63."

LETTER FROM AN INSECT-HUNTING ORNITHOLOGIST — 62

3. HABITAT SURVEYS

"Although information is needed on all kinds of habitats, one should, in selecting a habitat for survey, choose one that can be covered adequately with the resources at one's command. A patch of jungle may appeal as containing more kinds of birds than are found among paddy-fields, and therefore being on the face of it more interesting, but it is infinitely more difficult to survey it adequately. Until one has worked out one's own technique on easier habitats it is wiser not to attempt a comprehensive survey of so difficult a subject as jungle or scrub if one is aiming at detail and accuracy, as the results will probably be neither accurate nor complete and may well be misleading.

It is advisable to select a habitat that is characteristic of other districts as well, so that it may be used for comparative work later on, though surveys of isolated and non-recurring habitats are still valuable in view of the paucity of records so far collected, particularly if it is one which is likely to disappear eventually. Another point to bear in mind is that what are natural boundaries to us may well be 'highways' or gathering points for the birds we wish to study. A hedge or a continuous line of bushes may be a serious obstacle for man (and therefore a convenient boundary to his activities) unless there are gaps through which he can pass, but it is likely to be the headquarters of many birds.

The type of habitat to survey must inevitably depend to a great extent on one's resources and qualifications and objects. If one is working with other specialists as a team with the object of undertaking an intensive and exact study of the structure of a community, one must of necessity choose a somewhat limited area. On the other hand, if one is working entirely alone and one's opportunities for field work are restricted or irregular, it is probably wise to limit one's object to compiling a comprehensive list of all the birds seen in the district. In this case a larger area can be covered, but one should be prepared to sub-divide it into its component minor habitats and try to disentangle the real use to which each one is put by the birds seen there. If one moves about the country from time to time similar methods can be applied to each place visited and interesting comparisons can later be made between the various habitats covered. It is useful when doing this to work out a formula or 'pro-forma' for the form and order in which one's reports are to be couched, as this facilitates comparisons later on."

"In studying any particular habitat the first thing to be done is to describe it fully and accurately, and in this it is a great advantage if the help of a competent botanist can be enlisted to describe the vegetation, an entomologist to deal with the insects, and of other specialists to cover such matters as the local climatic conditions, the fauna, and the soil and geology. A team of observers, each one competent in his own particular field, is ideal for any habitat survey, and the combined knowledge of such observers as are available may be sufficient to bridge the gap left by the absence of, say, a geologist. Even so, a lot of useful work can be done by one man working on his own, provided he is observant, accurate and knows his own limitations.

Many features in each habitat change during the course of a year and full records should, of course, be kept of these as they may well affect the bird life. Plants come into flower and fruit, the leaves of some of them fall leaving the branches bare and a carpet of dead leaves on the ground beneath, which provides cover for insects; paddy is planted, flooded and harvested and all these changes may in some way or other influence the use to which the birds put the jungle or the paddy-fields. The meteorological records should include temperatures, rainfall, humidity, wind, cloud and so on in order to provide a comprehensive record of the weather experienced during the survey period. Some animals are known to be seen more often in a dry season, some plants thrive and fruit better in a wet one, but we know little of the limits within which dryness and wetness are effective.

The natural complement to a full description of a survey area is a map or plan of it. More often than not it is necessary to prepare one's own sketch plan and this should be large enough to show all the important features clearly. If the survey area comprises more than one kind of minor habitat, these should be shown on the plan by means of different kinds of shading or hatching, or better still by the use of different coloured inks. . . ."

"Before embarking on any survey it is a good plan to formulate certain guiding 'rules'. Are you, for instance, going to include birds seen only flying over, and if so how are you going to refer to them in your notes and in your final report? How do you propose to deal with mixed hunting parties, which are only passing casually through the survey area? Are you going to attempt periodic counts of numbers? If so, they will require a special set of rules of their own. The making of censuses is outside the scope of this paper and anyone interested is advised to look up the reports of past censuses. Decide on these points before starting on the actual survey, so that your records may be consistent throughout.

Having selected the survey area, made a sketch plan of it, and written down a full description of the habitat, one can then begin a survey of the birds. If one is aiming at great exactitude and a detailed result, the area should be inspected at frequent intervals preferably every day, and as far as possible one's visits should take place at the same time or times each day. This is not always possible, nor is it always essential if one is aiming only at a more general result. A small note-book should always be carried in the field and the observations entered in this during or immediately after the visit to the survey area; memory dulls one's observations very quickly and accuracy may often be lost in a matter of an hour."

"Whatever methods used to keep records of the survey, it is important to evaluate one's observations in order to avoid giving a distorted impression to others. If one is absolutely not certain of the identity of a bird seen it is essential that this be made clear in the records. There are many occasions on which even the most experienced ornithologist is not absolutely certain beyond all doubt of the identity of the bird he has seen, and there is nothing to be ashamed of in confessing one's uncertainty. . . ."

"The records should always include a note of the time and conditions under which they were made, and of all incidental matters which might affect either the birds themselves or the validity of the record. Observations with the naked eye from a moving train or car are obviously more open to mistake and inexactitude than observations made with field glasses at only a few yards range. . . ."

[M.D. Lister, 1951, "Birds and Ecology," *J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, 50: 150-154.]

Before I comment a little more on 'habitat surveys' I must inform readers about an important modification of the map of biogeographical areas I provided in my last Letter # 61 (*Pitta 145*, May 2003). Please note that the Kathiawar peninsula (or what is termed "Saurashtra") and the mainland portion of Gujarat State, which I call "Guzerat" (from Surat north to Ahmadabad and then to Palanpur and Deesa), to its east, actually forms part of the Central Highlands biogeographical area (with 635 recorded species of birds) and not of the Indus Plain as depicted inaccurately on my map. Only the Cutch portion of Gujarat is part of the Indus Plain biogeographical area (with 591 recorded species).

Lister's suggestions quoted above on the methods to be employed while making bird surveys need your careful study. First classify the 'habitat' you decide to survey (suited to your time constraints), using the five major 'Groups' I documented in my last Letter with their sub-divisions. I also recommend selecting the 1° quadrants where you normally reside (or often travel to) as the 100 sq. km area you could concentrate on until you move elsewhere, if at all. Each such quadrant will have several distinct habitat sub-divisions (unless it is total desert) and offer each bird watcher plenty to do in varied ecosystems, even if limited in area. For those of you residing in the Hyderabad—Secunderabad twin-town metropolis, I had already given the basic information on this quadrant in my Letter # 56 (Pitta 139, November 2002). Instead of doing the same KBR National Park, Patancheru ICRISAT Campus, Nehru Zoological Park, etc., time and again, why don't BSAP "Field Outing" organizers check out a relief-cum-vegetation map of the Hyderabad quadrant and then target unworked habitats that fall into the sub-divisions and groups that Lister and I mentioned? A large group of birders must also be divided into smaller parties of maximum 4-5 persons who can then head towards and check out each micro-habitat in the area selected for an outing for its birds. Remember that birds and other wild animals prefer to live in, and visit, places that are generally unfrequented (or inhabited) by human beings so you have a better chance of good "twitching" (or more) if you head towards little visited countryside or jungle. Members (and readers) may also benefit by reading my quotes of Hugh Whistler in Letters # 55 & 56 (Pitta 138 & 139, October & November 2002) and then consulting those books for greater detail.

As a fine example of what Lister had recommended, there was a paper titled "Notes on the Birds of a selected area of Dehra Dun—June 1946 to July 1951" published by Mrs M.D. Wright (a rare lady birder in those days! "Ladybirds" are also beautiful little beetles of the family Coccinellidae, another special interest of mine, of which I have named and described a few new Indian species and have many more to "christen"!) in the JBNHS (54: 627-662) in 1957 which dealt with a total of 226 species. She had also done "A Bird count in Dehra Dun" (JBNHS 48: 570-572A; 1949). These also have maps like Lister requested of authors and interested persons among you would do well to check out Mrs Wright's papers and model their own future surveys on them.

Sālim Ali's Hyderabad State Ornithological Surveys were carried out by him, with the taxidermal assistance of E. Heinricks, of the Bombay Natural History Society, and of his "young cousin" Humayun Abdulali (when on his college vacations), from October 3rd to December 20th 1931 and March 1st to April 25th 1932. This singular amateur naturalist's initial regional bird survey was completed in a private capacity through a minimal grant of Rs 1,000 received from the then Nizam Government's "Museum Committee." His report was published in 5 parts, comprising a total of 125 pages, in the Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society (36: 356-390, 707-725, 898-919 and 37: 124-142, 425-454) in 1933 and 1934, with a small 3-page additional note in 1938 (JBNHS 40: 497-499). Reprinted and bound (paperback) copies of this report are available with the BSAP, Hyderabad and would form an excellent model for modern birders who have the gumption and drive to do such important and critical bird surveys now. For a first attempt at a faunistic survey of a delimited area, by an unemployed bird watcher in his late thirties then, this work was of top quality at a time when practically all such fieldwork was being done by Britishers and other Europeans here. One such foreigner, Hugh Whistler, an erstwhile Indian Police Officer but then retired and based in England, was undoubtedly responsible, in large part, for this Indian's guidelines and success. Sālim Ali acknowledged Whistler in print for helping him with bird specimen identifications, taxonomic comments on the subspecies (which taxon had unfortunately been given precedence over species in those Hartert years), and also for "a number of notes from the literature dealing with neighbouring areas" Sālim Ali wrote. Sālim Ali and Hugh Whistler later continued with this partnership when compiling similar reports on the regional faunistic bird surveys made in other parts of British India (mainly in Indian Princely States) by Sālim Ali and his assistants for another decade or so until Whistler died, of cancer, in 1943. These papers must be credited to "Ali & Whistler" and not just to Sālim Ali as has been incorrectly done (e.g., see the 1974 INDIAN HANDBOOK, 1989 ANDHRA PRADESH CHECKLIST, etc.) but I note with approval that the 1995 BIBLIOGRAPHIC INDEX of Aasheesh Pittie adopts the correct authorship for these regional faunistic papers of Sālim Ali and Hugh Whistler. Sālim Ali's paper on the birds of Gujarat, soon after independence (1954-1955, JBNHS 52: 374-458, 735-802), lacked Whistler's input and possibly all the determinations of "subspecies" were done by himself, with occasional assistance from the now notoriously infamous Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen!

Dr Kumar Ghorpadé, c/o Doddagubbi P.O., Bangalore 562 149 & indiavifauna@yahoo.co.uk

Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh – First (1st) Notice dated 5th July 2003

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on 15th September 2003 (15.09.2003) at Vidyaranya High School, Saifabad. The timing of the meeting is 6.00 p.m. All members are requested to attend. The tentative programme for the meeting is given below:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Proposed Changes to the Constitution
- 5) Appointment of Auditors
- 6) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 7) Any other Business

SPOTLIGHT - MONTAGU'S HARRIER (*Circus pygargus*) By Siraj A. Taher

Like the males of the other two Harriers (Pallid and Hen) the male of the Montagu's (*Circus pygargus*) is also ashy-grey above and greyish white below. The two distinctive marks which make identification of this species easy are the dark primaries and a black band across the secondaries when looking from below, and the Rufous (or chestnut) coloured streaks on the belly and flanks.

Compared to the males of the other two species, the Pallid and the Hen, there are small differences in the extent of black on the primaries and the shades of grey of the body. The females of all these three species are very much more difficult to identify in the field, except with great practice. There are only minor differences in their overall brown plumage and barrings, rump widths and the bands on their tails. Immatures of *Circus pygargus* are similar to the females but deeper rufous below without streaks, which is diagnostic.

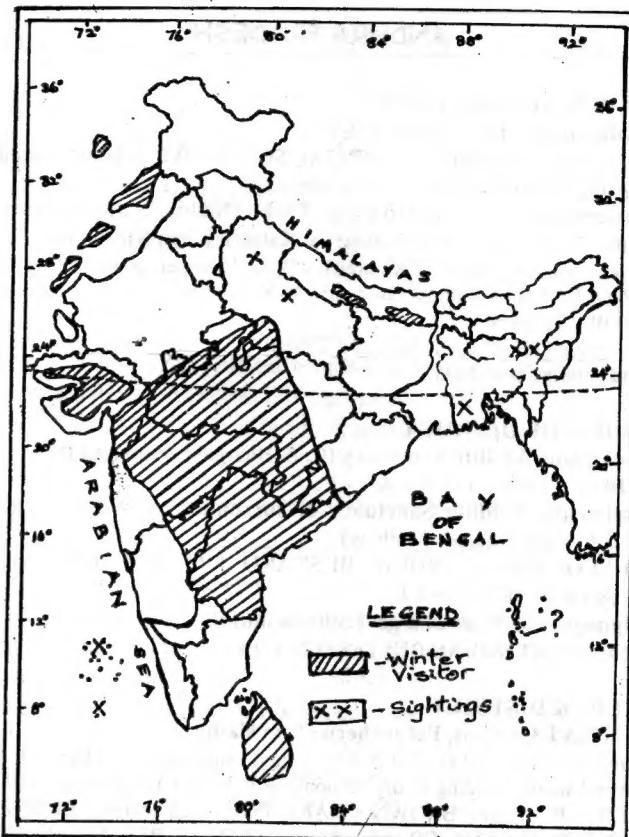
Ten species of the genus *Circus* are recognised in the world, out of which five species winter in the Indian sub-continent.

Like the other three harriers (except the Marsh), the preferred habitat of the Montagu's Harrier is open, grassy tracts, thinly cultivated fields and light scrub. They prefer to sit on the ground rather than perch in trees or bushes. Usually, they are solitary hunters, preferring to hunt by day. Usually roosts communally but has been occasionally seen in mixed groups. Mainly it is a silent bird, but has been heard to give out calls when coming in to roost, probably to identify its own species.

Its food consists of lizards, grasshoppers, bird nestlings, small snakes and mammals and frogs. In their breeding grounds, they are seen to breed between May – July in England, Northern Europe, Western Asia (south of 57°N), Spain and Northwest Africa. The nest, made of grass and reeds is built on the ground in a field or in a bed of bulrushes near a swamp. The normal clutch is 4 – 6 plain bluish-white eggs, sometimes blotched with pale red. The female only incubates for 28 days. Both sexes take part in the care and feeding of the chicks.

The Montagu's Harrier, like the others of its genus, is a winter visitor to the Sub-continent, Pakistan, Palestine and Southern Africa, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. In India, it is fairly widely distributed from the foothills of the Himalayas, Assam, rare in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, the Andamans and Lakshadweep Islands. It is observed less frequently than the Pallid Harrier in most of India, but records show the Montagu's to be seen more often than the Pallid around Hyderabad city and surrounding areas. In Andhra Pradesh the early records are from Paloncha (Khammam Dist.), Kolair (Kolleru, W. Godavari Dist.) and Siddhout (Siddhavatam, Cuddapah Dist.). Recent records are from Medak, Ranga Reddy, Kadapa (Cuddapah) and Kurnool

Districts. In Hyderabad, the first date of arrival is 19th September and the last date of departure has been noted as 31st March.



As with most of the Harriers, fewer birds are being seen than a couple of years earlier, even in places where they were regularly seen. Loss of habitat, excessive use of pesticides and shooting down by farmers and game bird preserve managers could be the reasons for this decline in numbers. In Britain and Europe, appreciable reduction in breeding numbers has been noticed. No studies have been undertaken in any of their breeding areas, migration routes or wintering grounds to determine this population decline. This lack of data and the necessity to take proper action in various countries rather than any one makes the problem of conservation of any migratory species very complex.

For the conservation process of the birds of the genus *Circus*, it is vital to educate the main enemies of these birds, viz. the farmers and range managers in their breeding grounds; and land developers and heavy pesticide users in their wintering quarters. No bird of prey is destructive to human interests and whether it is large or small, it never feeds exclusively on domestic stock. In fact, they are our friends in that they destroy more rats and rodents than they would the farmyard stock. Hence all hawks should command our respect.

BIRDING NOTES Compiled by Aasheesh Pittie

This column publishes notes in brief telegraphic form, from **Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan & Tamil Nadu** on interesting and significant sightings and behaviour like breeding, feeding, migration, nesting, etc. Notes on threatened birds are also welcome. Their status ** follows BirdLife International (2001) *Threatened Birds of Asia*. English names, sequence and scientific nomenclature follow Manakadan & Pittie (2002): Standardised English and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 42(3): i-viii, 1-36. Unless specified, all observations are for 2002. Abbreviations, Contributors, Notes, Regional Referees, etc., are at the end. For selection of breeding criteria 'Probable, Possible, Confirmed', see *Pitta* # 82, February 1998, p. 4.

ANDHRA PRADESH

HYDERABAD DISTRICT

Hyderabad City: Banjara Hills

20.vi (Aasheesh Pittie): ORIENTAL SCOPS OWL 1, blundered into drawing room of residence on a windy night.

Hyderabad City: Sanjivayya Park (Nikhil Narayanaswamy, Vinay N, Prashanth KR, Adhokshaj Katarni, Kiran Katikaneni)

22.vi: ASIAN PIED STARLING CB, 2 N under const; GOLDEN ORIOLE PRB, 1 N under const.; BLACK DRONGO CB 1 N; HOUSE CROW CB, 30 N.

29.vi: WHITE-BREASTED KINGFISHER CB, 1 N in sandbank. Adult seen entering with food.

KURNOOL DISTRICT

Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary (C. & Bhargavi Srinivasulu)

9-10.iii: LESSER FLORICAN 1 F.

Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary & surrounds (S. Ashok Kumar, JVD Moorthy, Raajeev Mathew)

20-22.vi: GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD 4 M, 14 F, CB 1 yng.; LESSER FLORICAN 2 F.

Vipnagandla (C. & Bhargavi Srinivasulu)

9.iii: GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD 2 M, 1 F.

MEDAK DISTRICT

ICRISAT Campus, Patancheru (Tom Hash)

2.iv: SPOT-BILLED PELICAN 1 juv. Subsequently observed for several weeks, feeding in drying pools of ICRISAT tank; BRAHMINY KITE CB, 1 juv.; BROWN CRAKE POB, seen mating; BRONZE-WINGED JACANA CB, ads. & imm.; LITTLE RINGED PLOVER CB, ad. & imm.; INDIAN TREPIE robbing nest, and eating blue-shelled eggs, of Red-vented Bulbul.

13.iv: GREY FRANCOLIN CB, ads., with downy chicks; several families seen at different parts of the farm this month; CHESTNUT-BELLIED SANDGROUSE M and F; first record inside ICRISAT campus; SIRKEER MALKOHA first record inside ICRISAT campus; HOOPOE CB, one ad., passed food to another who carried it into a crack--missing mortar--between stones in the wall of the Manmool fortress.

RANGAREDDI DISTRICT

Anantgiri (Kiran Katikaneni, Vinay, Zubin)

25.v: CHANGEABLE HAWK-EAGLE CB, 1 N with yng.

GUNTUR DISTRICT

Uppalapadu Herony (K. Mrutyumjaya Rao)

13.iii: SPOT-BILLED PELICAN CB, 550 including immatures, 120 N; BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT-HERON 300; PAINTED STORK CB 400 N, almost all with yng.; PURPLE MOORHEN CB 14 N in *Typha* sp.

VISAKHAPATNAM DISTRICT

Araku (C. & Bhargavi Srinivasulu)

3.iii: ASIAN PIED STARLING.

Damuku (C. & Bhargavi Srinivasulu)

14-16.iii: BLACK EAGLE 7; BLACK-CRESTED BULBUL 3.

Sankrametta (C. & Bhargavi Srinivasulu)

3.iii: BLACK EAGLE 1.

Tyda (C. & Bhargavi Srinivasulu)

2-4.iii: BLACK-CRESTED BULBUL 5; BLUE-HEADED ROCK THRUSH 1.

14-16.iii: CRESTED GOSHAWK 1 M.

GOA

NORTH GOA DISTRICT

Chapora Estuary (Heinz Lainer)

7.ii: WESTERN REEF-EGRET 55+; SLENDER-BILLED GULL 440+.

23.ii: SANDWICH TERN 50+.

9.iv: SLENDER-BILLED GULL 1; GULL-BILLED TERN 106 (39 in br. plm.); COMMON TERN 1 br. plm.

Tivim-Damedem (Heinz Lainer)

16.iii: BESRA SPARROWHAWK POB 1 juv.; LESSER SPOTTED EAGLE 1 juv.

Anjuna (Heinz Lainer)

5.iv: SHIKRA PRB, pair; CRIMSON SUNBIRD 1 M non-br. plm.

SOUTH GOA DISTRICT

Dudhsagar Top (Heinz Lainer)

22-25.iv: NILGIRI WOOD-PIGEON 1; BLUE-BEARDED BEE-EATER 1; WHITE-CHEEKED BARBET CB; SMALL YELLOW-NAPED WOODPECKER 4; INDIAN BLUE ROBIN 1 M; WYNAAD LAUGHINGTHRUSH 5+; INDIAN RUFOUS BABBLER 5+.

ABBREVIATIONS: Ab-abundant; ad-adult/s; br-breeding; C-common/ly; c.-approximately; CB-confirmed breeding; CD*-conservation dependent; const-construction/ing; CR*-critical; DD*-data deficient; disp-display/ing; EN*-endangered; F-female; flt-flight; fly-family; freq-frequent/ly; hrld-heard; id-identify/ied; imm-immature; inc-include/ing; Is-Island; juv-juvenile; LM-local migrant; M-male; mat-material; N-nest/ing/s; NT*-near threatened; OH-overhead; POB-possible breeding; PRB-probable breeding; plm-plumage; RF-Reserve Forest; Resp-respectively; Tlk-Taluk; vil-village; VU*-vulnerable; WL-wildlife; yng-young.

REGIONAL REFEREES: Andhra Pradesh: Aasheesh Pittie; Delhi: Suresh Chand Sharma; Goa: Heinz Lainer; Haryana: Suresh Chand Sharma; Karnataka: S. Subramanya; Kerala: P.O. Nameer; Maharashtra: Nitin Jamdar; Punjab: H.S. Sangha; Rajasthan: H.S. Sangha; Tamil Nadu: V. Santharam.

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Membership (Rs): Admission=100; Annual=200; Student=100 per annum. Life=2,000. Add Rs.25/- for outstation cheques.

IPITTA



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No. 148: August 2003

Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

PROGRAMME

FIELD OUTING: Members willing to take passengers may please contact the following: Shafaat Ulla (23353098) or Siraj Taher (55612608). Seats *may* be available in members' cars and will be reserved on a first-come-first-served basis. Book early to avoid disappointment.

Sunday, 24-viii-2003: Vanasthalipuram Deer Park, Ranga Reddy District: Route: Malakpet – Dilshukhnagar – LB Nagar. Members are requested to reach the destination by 6.45am. It is anticipated that there will be some new species of birds on this trip because we will be visiting an area which has newly been added to the park. Rosy Pastors may be sighted, possibly Short-toed Eagles and Greenbilled Malkoha. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further information contact Siraj Taher (55612608) or Shafaat Ulla (23353098) before 11am or after 4pm.

INDOOR MEETING: 18-viii-2002, 6pm: Talk by Raajeev Mathew on Birds of Prey, Vidyaranya High School, Opp., Secretariat, Saifabad, Hyderabad.

NOTES & NEWS

Happenings of the Society - Field Trip to Chilkur Deer Park on 27th July 2003.

Then, it was on the 24th Nov 2002, now it was on 27th July 03. We were going back to a place where we all had been united with Nature, Mrugavani National Park-Chilkur. We were here last year with Kids for tigers and are now here with BSAP.

Compared to the previous year, the park was much more beautiful due to rains. It was hard to see birds, but we managed to see a **roller**. Trying to get a closer look at it, all I was able to do was run from tree to tree. A couple of **purple rumped sunbirds**, dim due to the cloudy sky, greeted us with their remaining splendour. We saw a **Cormorant** flying overhead, probably rejoicing that the monsoons had set in. From the gates we hiked on to the watchtower. The beauty of the place enthralled us; trees were lush green and were full of leaves, if not flowers.

Bulbuls were a common sight in this park but they preferred to be unseen. At last we reached the tower. Beautiful! Enchanting! Anyone would go into a Trance at the sight. Acres and acres of green forestland stretched in front of us. From our perch we had a perfect view of a lake that was flooded with water.

Three **Spot billed ducks** and a few **River terns** encircled the area, like vultures before they disappeared from sight (It was as if the ducks were posing for a photograph). We did some climbing on the rocks and we found out that the park, true to

the words that it was among the best places for rock formation.

We saw a large number of hoof marks obviously left behind by a herd of **spotted deer**. Mr. Ravi a wild life photographer showed us how to draw tiger pugmarks. Tough to draw, I'd say. We hadn't yet recovered from the trance of the view when Kiran spotted another beauty-a **Pied cuckoo**, like a black and white television perched on a tree just above the car parking. We also saw a few insects like the **velvet mite**, the **six spotted tiger beetle**, **millipedes** and **centipedes**.

On the way back home, we saw some elegant **king fishers**, **orioles** and **weaverbirds**. I reached home at 1.30 pm praying that this National park must not be destroyed like the Forest of Ananthagiri.

NIKHIL.N

BSAP - SINGARENI COLLIERIES EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS - CAMPS AND TEACHERS TRAINING PROGRAMMES.

As part of the Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL), and BSAP joint programmes for Environmental Awareness, Nature Studies and Birding Fieldwork, the Society deputed Humayun Taher to start with the Nature Study and Birdwatching trips for some of their educational institutions which were participating in camps at Chilkur Deer Park, Rangareddi Dist. along with the A.P. Forest Department. These camps were held on 28 June

and 6 July in which three schools participated in each of the programmes. On 13 July, two women's degree colleges took part in the camp. The programme consisted of taking the participants on a field walk through the park and explaining about nature, birds and animals. There were also lectures on the subject after the field trip was completed.

The next programme included Teachers Training Workshops on 17 – 19 July at Kothagudem (Khammam Dist.) and 21 – 23 July at Godavarikhani (Karimnagar Dist.) The BSAP was not involved with the third workshop conducted from 24 – 26 July at Bellampalli (Adilabad Dist.) For these workshops also Humayun Taher conducted the first day's proceedings for the participating teachers. The topics covered were Evolution and Biological Diversity. A PowerPoint presentation was specially prepared for the occasion. Response was quite good and the teachers appeared to show much enthusiasm in implementing the training at their respective schools.

The Society has prepared a special syllabus to be implemented in the educational institutions of the SCCL after their concurrence and acceptance of the subjects covered. Even though the emphasis in this syllabus will be on avifauna, it under no conditions will be restricted to birds only and will encompass all aspects of the natural world, their interactions and interdependence.

Books & Journals received

The BSAP reading room received the following books and journals/periodicals during July 2003.

Books

The Society's library was substantially enriched when we received a generous donation of 10 books from the **World Land Trust**, U.K. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in making this possible. At the World Land Trust we would like to thank Miss Kirsty Forbes (Projects Manager) and Molly St. George (Manager, NGO, Book Distribution Service). When they informed us that the books were ready and we could collect them (in London), we thought we were stuck. But our Life Member and well-wisher, Mary Peacock made it all seem so easy. Christine, her daughter, collected and kept them in London. Dr Surendra Ugale, an old friend, who is keenly interested in wildlife, solved the problem of bringing them to India from London. BSAP relies heavily on the support of its members and they seldom let us down. We are indebted to Mary Peacock, Christine Peacock and Dr Surendra Ugale.

In the same league of friends are Bikram Grewal and Bill Harvey, who donated a copy of their latest book, to our library.

1. Davies, S.J.J.F. (2002): Ratites and Tinamous. Oxford University Press, London. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
2. Fuller, Errol (2001): Extinct Birds. New ed. Oxford University Press, London. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].

3. Gibbs, David, Eustace Barnes & John Cox (2001): Pigeons and Doves. A Guide to the Pigeons and Doves of the World. Pica Press, U.K. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
4. Heath, M.F. & M.I. Evans (Eds.) (2001): Important Bird Areas in Europe. Priority Sites for Conservation. Southern Europe. Vol. 2 of 2 vols. Cambridge, U.K. BirdLife International. (BirdLife Conservation Series No. 8). [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
5. Inskip, Carol (1988): A Birdwatchers' Guide to Nepal. Prion Ltd., U.K. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
6. Mackinnon, John & Karen Phillipps (2000): A Field Guide to the Birds of China. Oxford University Press, London. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
7. Matthiessen, Peter (2002): The Birds of Heaven. Travels with Cranes. Harvill Press, U.S.A. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
8. National Geographic Society (????): Field Guide to the Birds of North America. 3rd ed. National Geographic, America. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
9. Nethersole-Thompson, Desmond & Maimie (1991): Waders. Their Breeding, Haunts and Watchers. 2nd ed. T. & A.D. Poyser, U.K. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
10. Simpson, Ken & Nicolas Day (1999): Field Guide to the Birds of Australia. Helm Publishers. [Donated by the World Land Trust, U.K.].
11. Grewal, Bikram; Bill Harvey and Otto Pfister (2002): A Photographic Guide to the Birds of India and the Indian Subcontinent, Including Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka & the Maldives. Periplus Editions (HK) Ltd., Hong Kong. [Donated by the authors.].

Journals / Periodicals

1. Down to Earth. Vol. 12. No. 3. June 30, 2003 [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie.].
2. Down to Earth. Vol. 12. No. 4. July 15, 2003. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie.].
3. Birdwatchers' Digest. Vol. 25. No. 6. July-August 2003. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie.].
4. Samsad News. Vol. 21. No. 6. June 2003. [Exchange.].
5. Channel 6. July 2003. [Subscription copy.].
6. Protected Area Update. No. 43. June 2003. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie.].

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON CONSERVATION

Birds of Prey have been significantly hit in recent times, as far as conservation is concerned. The most glaring example of this, of course, is the worldwide decline in Vulture populations, a phenomenon so alarming that special programmes have been hastily implemented to try and get to the root of the problem and find a solution. But Vultures are not the only species that have suffered. The

American Peregrine Falcon was almost extinct before conservationists and scientists began to take note and, thanks to successful captive breeding programmes and releases, a very satisfactory recovery of the species was made.

Release of species into wilderness areas is something which is still partly clouded in controversy. To take just one example, several years ago Barn Owls were released in the Andaman Islands to combat rodents, and replace the extinct endemic Andaman Barn Owl. For several reasons, the released birds failed to adapt to the environment and the experiment proved a failure. This prompted the question, did the Andaman subspecies of Barn Owls become extinct from habitat loss, excessive persecution, or an inability to adapt to a changing environment. It is important in any release programme to determine exactly what effects the release will have **before** releasing animals or birds into a new habitat.

Coming back to conservation of species – exactly what constitutes conservation? Does it involve protection of the species through protecting its habitat? Or taking care of the food supplies and breeding areas of the species, (the House Sparrow is a good example of this, where packed rice and apartment houses have robbed it of both food supplies and nesting places). Or does it constitute complete *ex-situ* conservation, through zoological parks and nature preserves.

I think it is fair to say that conservation encompasses all the above and then some more. For example, if we are trying to protect the Indian Tiger, there is no point in saying protect the animals in artificial areas such as zoological parks or breeding programmes. Conservation of the species should include conservation of its habitat and the prey species on which it subsists. This is, of course, the concept of *Umbrella Species*, which has gained momentum of late and is now recognised as one of the leading conservation strategies.

Currently, looking around at the prevailing situation, there appears to be a growing awareness in all circles of the need for conservation of species and the habitat. Unfortunately, at some of the highest levels, this is not reflected. It is all too apparent, at a cursory glance at the newspapers, that several pristine habitats are in imminent danger of disappearing without a trace. The Kasu Brahmananda Reddy National Park is a prime example of this, where encroachment and degradation of the habitat, in the name of *Development*, is rampant. It is resulting in the complete destruction of one of the last remaining areas of natural habitats in the city and a unique ecosystem, which can never be replaced or repaired. This may sound harsh, but it is all too true. Development should not mean the destruction of natural habitats. It is fair to say that no one would object to development if done properly; but not at the expense of natural ecosystems.

The University of Hyderabad is another place where conservation measures need to be implemented with immediate effect. The once existing area has already been encroached on to an alarming effect, what with large tracts of land already having been given away to agencies like the

sports' authorities for stadiums and for educational institutions such as the IIIT, amongst others. It seems almost criminal that these pristine wildlife areas have been appropriated by agencies which have no interest in preserving the natural habitat as it should be, and those agencies which would like to do so are handicapped by interference at high levels.

We really need to rethink our approach to conservation. Programmes like *Clean and Green* sound wonderful on paper, but their implementation leaves a lot to be desired. Green does not, in this part of the country, mean artificial lawns and exotic flowering trees. Trees like Jacaranda and even Eucalyptus are not endemic to the subcontinent and have a detrimental effect on the ecosystem. Neither are smooth lawns part of the natural habitat of the region. No one objects to the green drive, provided it is done properly. Planting of natural and endemic trees such as Peepul, Neem, Mango, Tamarind and such like, although taking a long time to grow, does more to preserve and better the habitat than planting ten times the number of exotic species. It is almost tantamount to thoughtlessness the way natural trees and plants are being cut down to be replaced with grass lawns and flowering trees. This is resulting in lost habitat for several species. Take a few moments to reflect on how many species are seen on eucalyptus trees – you can count the numbers on the finger of one hand. It is safe to say that the Eucalyptus tree does not support any natural life – animal or plant. Even the bushes growing under the tree soon die, robbed of the moisture, which is appropriated by the Eucalyptus.

Where will all this end? We have a great responsibility towards protecting our environment, and we are shirking our responsibility to an alarming extent. In the words of Gerald Durrell, one of the foremost naturalists of his generation – “We have inherited an incredibly beautiful and complex garden . . . but the fact is that we have been appallingly bad gardeners . . .” This is exactly what has happened today. It is all very well to blame everything on bureaucracy and government and just sit back and lament on the situation. But the fact is that – what are we doing to try and prevent it from happening and to bring it home to the concerned agencies that what they are doing is wrong. One voice cannot perhaps be heard – but a hundred voices can be. Look at the *Chipko* movement. One man – Sunderlal Bahuguna – started the movement which soon graduated into a revolution. Green Peace, which started with one rowboat and a handful of people opposing the whaling industry grew into a worldwide movement which now encompasses the globe. Collectively we can all make a difference – on whether the earth survives, or it dies and we die with it!

Perhaps it is now time to retake a certain promise, which I think every person who is interested in nature should make. This saying has been adopted by the Timbavati Nature Reserve in South Africa and simply says, “*The wildlife of today is not ours to do with as we please. We have it in trust. We must account for it to those who come after us.*”

WHAT MAKES A BIRDWATCHER . . .

Adapted from an article by Simon Barnes in Birds, the RSPB Magazine, Spring 2003, Vol. 19 No. 5 with suitable changes in bird and area names to reflect Indian scenarios.

Transcribe my field notebook into a diary. Send my sightings of the Orphean Warbler to the rarities committee. Add this morning's details to my study of population dynamics of Indian Corvids. Recognise a Curlew Sandpiper in a flock of Dunlins thanks to my acute eyes and long familiarity with both species.

These are all things that I haven't done today. But I have just seen a bunch of House Crows riding a Ferris wheel of air and shouting like hooligans as they did so. And I can hear the chatter and gossip from a very merry band of House Sparrows: there are so few left nowadays that it's worthwhile trying to understand what they are saying. That's not a bad day's birdwatching.

I think it's time we opened a campaign for the preservation of that threatened species, the bad birdwatcher. I think we need to recruit more and more bad birdwatchers: we need vast and serried ranks of people peering unashamedly through cheap (or expensive) binoculars and thumbing through their field guides wondering if that's a Mallard or on the other hand, perhaps it's only a domestic duck. Or maybe a Spoonbill.

It's one of those heresies of the current century: that you have to be an expert on something before there is any point in doing it. I'm a bad birdwatcher myself. I'd like to claim that I am a *good* bad birdwatcher – like Hamlet, when the wind was southerly I can tell a hawk from a handsaw – but I'm not the man you want if you are keen on picking out that Curlew Sandpiper.

The way to becoming a bad birdwatcher is open to us all: but there are an awful lot of obstacles. The first is the publicity given to the twitching fraternity, those collectors of rarities, lost souls who hit these areas by mistake and generally die soon after. The birds, that is, not the twitchers.

There is the notion that to be a birdwatcher, you must be obsessed by rarities. This is nonsense – as most twitchers will tell you on their saner days. This collection-mania is just a young-man's thing, like riding motorcycles at lightning speeds, or going to cricket matches and drinking several pints of lager. There are other ways of enjoying life, other ways of enjoying birds.

Which is what it's all about..But it's so intimidating. You get a very basic field guide: and you discover at once that the Reed Warbler and the Chiffchaff are more or less identical, so are the Verditer and Dull-Blue Flycatcher, so are the Roseate and Common Terns. The only answer is to give up at once.

Or say you are going to the seaside. You'll just watch seagulls and enjoy them, because they're easy to see and easy to tell apart. Then you try to tell a second winter Yellow-Legged Gull from a first winter Heuglin's Gull – and decide to chuck the book into the sea, and your binoculars afterwards.

It's just too hard to be a good birdwatcher. But the answer is not to give up. It is to become a bad birdwatcher. A sudden cacophony in the trees overhead. What are those mad little birds? Not a clue. Ah, but it gives you a chance to revel in the amazing diversity of forms in which life comes, in the endless forms most beautiful.

The thing is to banish the sense of guilt. Say you don't know what kind of bird it was, even after you have looked it up in the book. The nearest thing is a Graceful Prinia (resident of Israel). Never mind, it was a great bird – Remember it as "possible Graceful Prinia". But keep quiet about it.

It's possible you wouldn't be able to pick out a Marsh Warbler because you recognise its imitation of the African species it meets on migration. Never mind: it's a great concert. And if you wish, note it down as European Cuckoo (prob).

The point of birdwatching often gets lost. The point of birdwatching is not making lists, or seeking rarities, or becoming immensely talented, or making a contribution to science. The point of birdwatching is watching birds: and it's something that is open to all of us.

So here is my advice to anyone who likes birds and wants to enjoy them just a little bit more. Just watch them. End of advice. Oh, all right, you can look them up, put a name to them and you'll find that adds to the pleasure. Learning half-a-dozen songs from a tape will positively double your pleasure in the garden or park.

Birdwatching is not a specialised hobby, it is not necessarily an obsession. It is simply a way of living: of living with your eyes and ears open, and finding that birds enrich every day of your life. That's why everybody who is not a *good* birdwatcher should make a real effort to become a *bad* birdwatcher.

OBITUARY

CHRIS MEAD 1940 – 2003

Chris mead assured the editors (of BIRDS) that he was planning enough 'Learning about birds' features for BIRDS for several more years shortly before he died, unexpectedly, in his sleep in January 2003. His dedication and enthusiasm for birds started in his student days when he took up bird ringing – he personally caught and ringed a massive 400,000 birds. He trained and inspired dozens of others with the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) until he retired in 1994. He was head of the British national ringing scheme for many years and was largely responsible for the computerization of ringing information – making a big impact on bird conservation. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of birds and an amazing ability to recall and present facts in novel and interesting ways, so well demonstrated in his 'Learning about birds' series for BIRDS.

He was a popular spokesman for birds and was keen to share his huge knowledge via the web and his books. His *The State of the Nations' Birds* combines an analysis of abundant data with his inimitable popular touch, including glum and smiley faces and soaring and diving birds to indicate changing species' fortunes.

He was honoured with medals from the BTO, the British Ornithologists' Union and the RSPB, and will be remembered for conveying his wonder at the life of birds to so many others. A great many people will miss him.

ROY SEBASTIAN 1931 - 2003

Roy Sebastian had been a member of the BSAP for several years. His passing away has left a number of friends who would miss him at the Society outings, indoor meetings and at organizational works.

Roy was basically a soil scientist by profession, who worked initially in the Agriculture Department before joining EID Parry Fertilizer Division, from where he moved on to Godavari Fertilizers. He was an accomplished photographer and thoroughly enjoyed his pursuits in this field. Roy joined the Horticulture Society at Hyderabad, from where he used his knowledge and experience for the benefit of all those interested in gardening and horticulture. He always boasted of Late Dr. Salim Ali's visit to a friend's farm in Nizamabad and his birding trips with the great man. It was as if to tell us all that he was one-up over all the others. He even would show his Book of Indian Birds, in which Salim Ali had made notations and also marked the birds sighted at the farm.

It never looked that Roy would leave us so suddenly for his heavenly abode, as he was still active with his photography and gardening advice at the Horticulture Society.

The BSAP conveys its condolences to his wife and other members of the bereaved family.

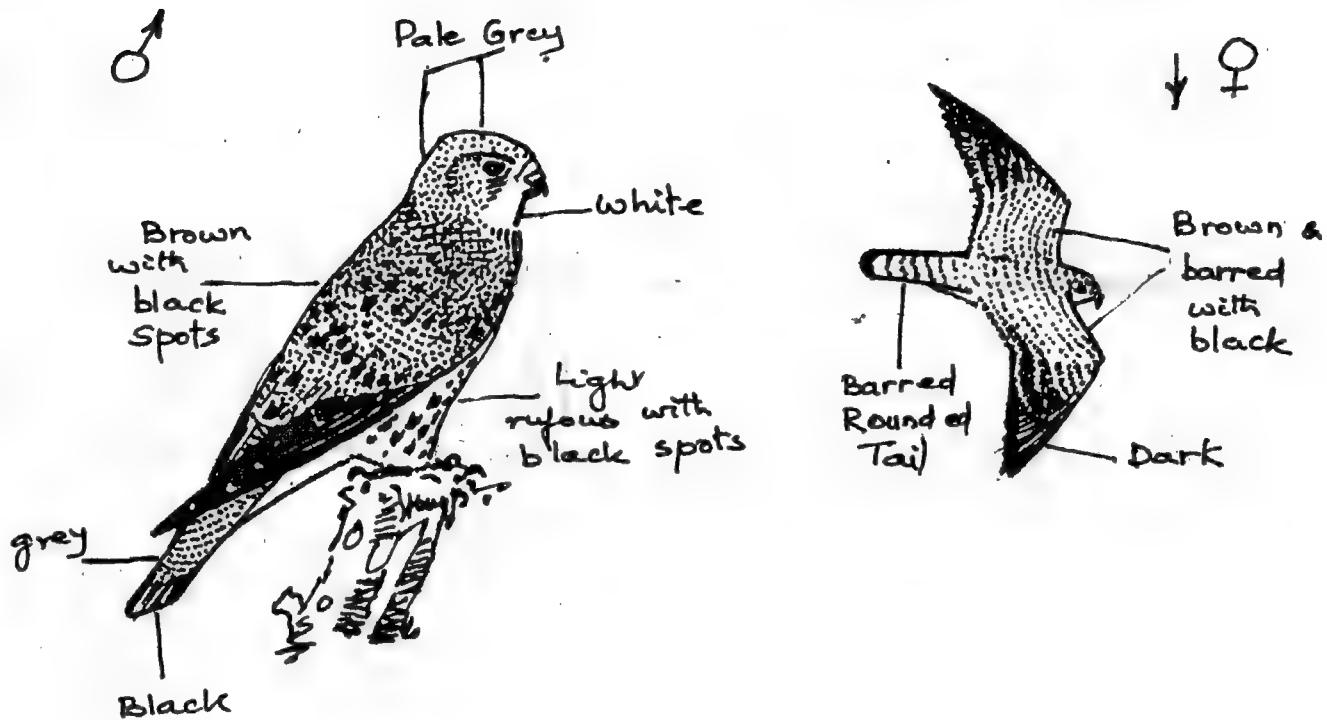
Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh – Second (2nd) Notice dated 10th August 2003

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on 15th September 2003 (15.09.2003) at Vidyaranya High School, Saifabad. The timing of the meeting is 6.00 p.m. All members are requested to attend. The tentative programme for the meeting is given below:

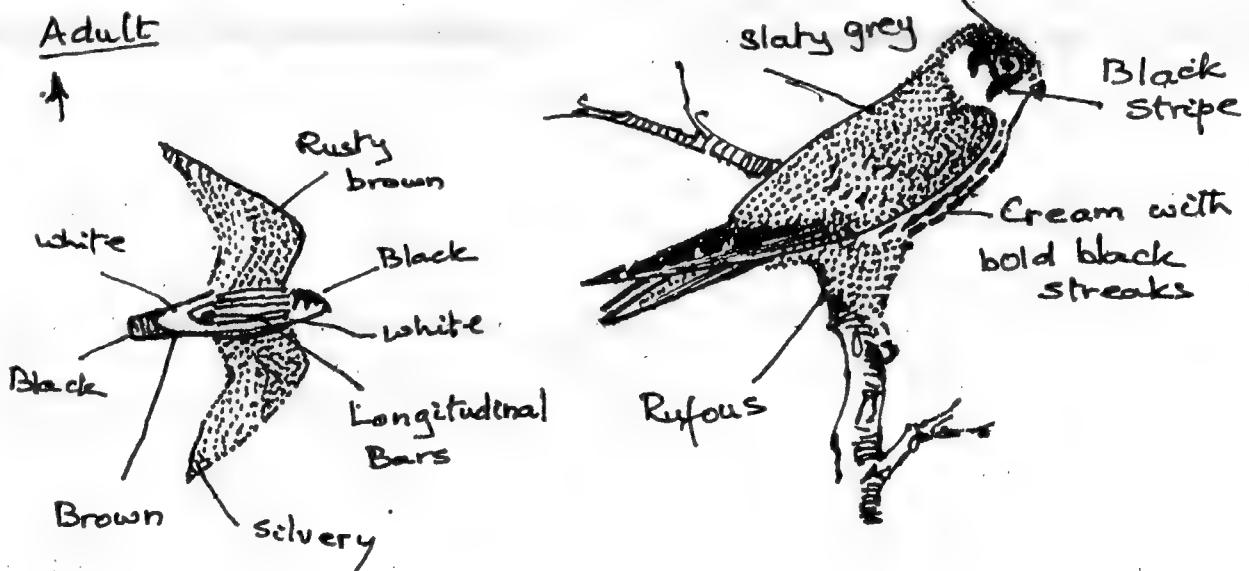
- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Proposed Changes to the Constitution
- 5) Appointment of Auditors
- 6) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 7) Any other Business

FIELD CRAFT By Siraj A. Taher & Sachin Jaltare

COMMON KESTREL
(*Falco tinnunculus*)
32-35 mm. - Pigeon +



EURASIAN HOBBY
(*Falco subbuteo*)
30-36 cms. Pigeon +



Where have all the Sparrows Gone - and Why?

The House Sparrow is one of our most familiar and popular birds. However, in recent years, their numbers have declined – sufficient for them now to be placed on the “Red List” of threatened birds. We need to know which areas in Andhra Pradesh (or elsewhere in India) still have House Sparrows. And that is why we are

asking you to count the sparrows where you live, or wherever you see them, however small the numbers may be. This you can do on any day from 1st of September to 31st of December 2003. You can send us these counts in a simple format just giving the date, place, no. of birds, any nesting activities, young, food being taken (if noticed), any other information.

BIRDWORD PUZZLE - No. 4

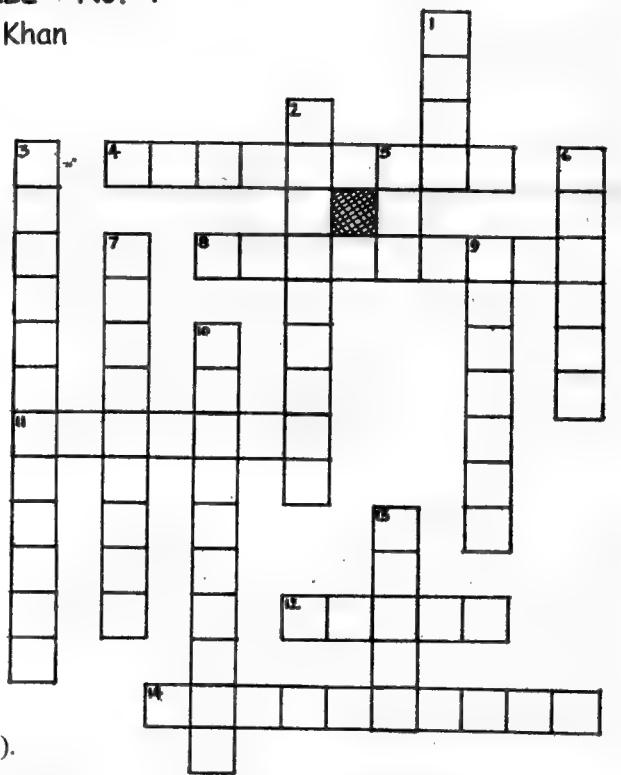
By M.M. Ali Khan

Note: Figures in Brackets denote number of alphabets

The puzzle contains bird names only

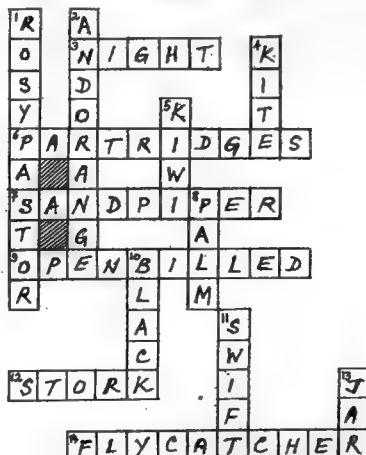
Correct solution to this puzzle will be given in the next issue of PITTA

1. Baked big plant but not to eat (4,3).
2. Silver ... feed ending with bill (9).
- 3 & 10. Has Midas touched the forest kissers back (12,10)?
4. Hamelin man on the beach (9).
5. See (1)
6. RED RAT changes (6)
7. ERR and INVERT on running water (9).
8. He excavates (9).
9. See (14).
10. See (3).
11. Wise bird watching stored straw (7).
- 12 & 13. GLARE and GREET together (5,5).
- 14 & 9. Leads danger away from nest with shrill cries (10,7).



Members are requested to send their solutions to PITTA at the Society address. The correct entries will be entered for a draw. The lucky winner receives a BSAP cap, donated by Mr. M.M. Ali Khan.

Solution to Birdword Puzzle – No. 3



SOCIETY T-SHIRTS AND CAPS NOW AVAILABLE FOR SALE:

Grey (With Society Logo)

Sizes: XL, L, M

Rs. 150.00 each

White (House Sparrow design)

Sizes: XL, L, M, S

Rs. 200.00 each

Caps (With Society Logo)

Rs. 75.00 each

BIRDING NOTES Compiled by Aasheesh Pittie

This column publishes notes in brief telegraphic form, from Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan & Tamil Nadu on interesting and significant sightings and behaviour like breeding, feeding, migration, nesting, etc. Notes on threatened birds are also welcome. Their status ** follows BirdLife International (2001) *Threatened Birds of Asia*. English names, sequence and scientific nomenclature follow Manakadan & Pittie (2002): Standardised English and scientific names of the birds of the Indian Subcontinent. *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* 42(3): i-viii, 1-36. Unless specified, all observations are for 2003. Abbreviations, Contributors, Notes, Regional Referees, etc., are at the end. For selection of breeding criteria 'Probable, Possible, Confirmed', see *Pitta* # 82, February 1998, p. 4.

ANDHRA PRADESH

RANGAREDDI DISTRICT

Vikarabad (Pranay Rao, Hyder Jaffer)

29.vi: BROWN FISH OWL 2; CRESTED SERPENT EAGLE -CB (Nest with 1 yng); GOLDEN ORIOLE 1; GOLDENBACKED WOODPECKER 1; FANTAIL FLYCATCHER 2.

Chevalla (Pranay Rao, Hyder Jaffer)

29.vi: INDIAN COURSER 4; COMMON SANDGROUSE 3; BARN OWL 1.

Himayath Sagar (Pranay Rao, Hyder Jaffer)

29.vi: PAINTED STORK 50; SPOTBILLS 100+.

Keesaragutta (Pranay Rao)

24.vii: LONGBILLED VULTURE 1; LARGE PIED WAGTAIL; LITTLE CORMORANT 2; SPOTBILLS 18; PIED CRESTED CUCKOO 1.

Chilkur Deer Park (H. Taher, M.S. Kulkarni, & BSAP Members)

26, 27.vii: COMMON IORA 4; PIED CRESTED CUCKOO 1; STONE CURLEW - hrd; GREY PARTRIDGE 4; PAINTED PARTRIDGE - hrd; PEAFOWL 6; GREAT HORNED OWL 1; INDIAN RIVER TERN 3; COMMON HAWK CUCKOO 1; NIGHT HERON 3; LESSER WHISTLING TEAL 1; WHITEBROWED FANTAIL FLYCATCHER 1; TICKELL'S BLUE FLYCATCHER 2; SPOTTED OWLET 1.

NALGONDA DISTRICT

Turkapalli (Pranay Rao)

1.vii: BONELLI'S EAGLE 2; WHITE-EYED BUZZARD 1; SHIKRA 2 (f); BLACKWINGED KITE 2; SHORT-TOED EAGLE 1; PAINTED PARTRIDGE 4; BUTTON QUAIL 2; GOLDENBACKED WOODPECKER 2; BLACKHEADED CUCKOO-SHRIKE 1; PIED CRESTED CUCKOO - hrd; PLAINTIVE CUCKOO - hrd; COMMON HAWK CUCKOO 1; BLACK IBIS 6; COMMON IORA 1.

Turkapalli (Pranay Rao)

24.vii: PAINTED PARTRIDGE - hrd; PIED CRESTED CUCKOO 1.

KHAMMAM DISTRICT

Kothagudem (Humayun Taher)

17.vii: BLACK IBIS 25; PIED MYNA 12; HOUSE SPARROW 8; LARGE PIED WAGTAIL 1; SPOTTED OWLET 2.

GUNTUR DISTRICT

Uppalapadu (K. Mrutyumjaya Rao)

1.vii: GREY PELICAN juv 19; PAINTED STORK juv 150, ad 50; COOTS 88; LITTLE EGRET br. plm. 160; NIGHT HERON 1100+; LITTLE CORMORANT 30; PURPLE HERON 1; PURPLE MOORHEN 7; BRONZEWINGED JACANA 4; JUNGLE CROW 37; OPENBILLED STORK 450+; WHITE IBIS 7.

EAST GODAVARI DISTRICT

Kakinada Town (K. Mrutyumjaya Rao)

17.vii: HOUSE SPARROW 110.

ABBREVIATIONS: Ab-abundant; ad-adult/s; br-breeding; C-common/ly; c.-approximately; CB-confirmed breeding; CD*-conservation dependent; const-construction/ing; CR*-critical; DD*-data deficient; disp-display/ing; EN*-endangered; F-female; flt-flight; fly-family; freq-frequent/ly; hrd-heard; id-identify/ed; imm-immature; inc-include/ing; Is-island; juv-juvenile; LM-local migrant; M-male; mat-material; N-nest/ing/s; NT*-near threatened; OH-overhead; POB-possible breeding; PRB-probable breeding; plm-plumage; RF-Reserve Forest; Resp-respectively; Tlk-Taluk; vil-village; VU*-vulnerable; WL-wildlife; yng-young.

REGIONAL REFEREES: Andhra Pradesh: Aasheesh Pittie; Delhi: Suresh Chand Sharma; Goa: Heinz Lainer; Haryana: Suresh Chand Sharma; Karnataka: S. Subramanya; Kerala: P.O. Nameer; Maharashtra: Nitin Jamdar; Punjab: H.S. Sangha; Rajasthan: H.S. Sangha; Tamil Nadu: V. Santharam.

PIGEON POST

1) I visited Mrugavani National Park, Chilkur on Saturday and Sunday along with my grandfather. In the evening I saw the Sambar and Chital deers in the bushes. For the first time I saw the Pied Crested Cuckoo, Sunbird, Jungle Crow, Drongo, Egrets, River Terns, Hoopoe, Roseringed Parakeet, Spotted Dove, Redvented Bulbul and Iora. I also heard the call of the Peafowl and the music of Koel. On the way we saw prints of Peacock, Sambar, Chital and the spot where the wild boar had dug a small pit for roots. We went up the tower to see the city. I enjoyed the trip very very very much.

R. Sreekar
Class IV

Obul Reddy Public School, Jubilee Hills

2) recently I observed two new House Sparrow roosting sites in Kakinada. One is in military road, 200 metres from Sarada Devi Temple with 70 Sparrows, and another near the RTC Complex railway gate opp. to fish and vegetable market, where there were 40 birds. Both trees are *Pongamia pinnata*.

K. Mrutyumjaya Rao

For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher & Humayun Taher (55612608), Raajeev Mathew (23310721)

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Membership (Rs): Admission=100; Annual=200; Student=100 per annum. Life=2,000. Add Rs.25/- for outstation cheques.



Bulletin of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh

No. 149: September 2003

Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

PROGRAMME

FIELD OUTING: Members willing to take passengers may please contact the following: Shafaat Ulla (23353098) or Siraj Taher (55612608). Seats *may* be available in members' cars and will be reserved on a first-come-first-served basis. Book early to avoid disappointment.

Sunday, 21-ix-2003: Shamirpet Lake and Deer Park, Ranga Reddy District: Route: Secunderabad – Trimulgherry - Cantonment. Members are requested to reach the destination by 6.45am. Interesting sightings may include Greyheaded Buntings, possibly Peregrine Falcons and lots of woodland birds. There may also be interesting waterbirds in the Shamirpet Lake. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further information contact Siraj Taher (55612608) or Shafaat Ulla (23353098) before 11am or after 4pm.

INDOOR MEETING: 15-ix-2003, 6pm: Annual General Meeting of the Society, Vidyaranya High School, Opp., Secretariat, Saifabad, Hyderabad.

NOTES & NEWS

Happenings of the Society - Field Trip to Vanasthalipuram Deer Park on 24th August 2003.

By M. Shafaat Ulla

The park, which is situated about 30 km. from the city just after Dilsukhnagar on the Vijayawada road, has a protected area of 3605 acres consisting of thorn and dry scrub forest, and grasslands typical of the Deccan Plateau. It has a considerable population of Blackbuck and Spotted Deer introduced by the Forest Department. It also has a wide variety of birds, both resident and local migrants, and winter migrants which come in from October to March.

Mr. Shankaran, Curator National Parks of the A.P. Forest Department, was kind enough to inform us that a further area of 1000 acres has been added to the park and hence it was decided to explore the place as it was a few years since the BSAP had organised an outing to the park.

We all gathered promptly at the gate, 17 members in all, and started walking into the park at 7:15 am. The first thing we noticed was the presence of hundreds of Pariah Kites and Crows, mostly on the western and northern side of the park, adjacent to the municipal garbage dump. Obviously there was a lot of food of their liking available, and a foul smell pervaded all over the park. The second aspect that we noticed was the near total absence of bird life. Initially we heard a Peafowl, the cackle of Large Grey Babblers followed by the call of a Partridge. A while later we saw a solitary male Koel

and a pair of Drongos. Later, on a side road near a bund we came upon the nest of a Peafowl with four eggs.

It was now about 9:30 a.m. and we decided to take a break for refreshments. We were hardly through when Mr. Jagdish Chandra of the Forest Department suggested that we visit the newly acquired area to the north which is more thickly forested. We all agreed instantly and set course behind Mr. Gopinath, our guide.

After a good walk of about two kilometres through thick foliage, we came to an elevated watch tower and climbed into it and had a breathtaking view of almost the entire Hyderabad city. It should be mentioned here that we were again disappointed by the lack of bird life. To be exact, we saw one juvenile Shikra, a pair of Redwattled Lapwings and a single Little Brown Dove in flight, not to forget four Mynas on a distant tall tree. In fact, the joke going around was that the birds had called a "bandh" that day, probably influenced by our politicians!

After rejuvenating ourselves with a half hour rest atop the tower platform and in the steady and cool breeze, we headed back for the gate and arrived there by about 12:30 p.m. having clocked about 8 km. and a thoroughly enjoyable, albeit exhausting, outing.

It is the opinion of many of us that a few BSAP volunteers should visit the park regularly for a few days to establish if the near absence of birds was a one time phenomenon or whether the birds are actually avoiding the park because of Kites and Crows or the smell from the dump or for any other reason.

Editor's Note: One of the reasons for not seeing many birds could be that in a thickly foliaged area or a forest, instead of continuously walking and expecting to see birds all over, one has to remain in one place quietly for sometime to first hear and locate a bird or see one. The name of the game is "patience". Still it will be a good idea, as Shafaat Ulla has suggested, to regularly monitor the new area.

Taking Wing on Heads and Tails: ID-ing Birds of Prey

(Based on a talk given by Raajeev Mathew at the Indoor Meeting of the Society on 18th August)

By M. Shobha

Be-bop-a-lula, it's BOP time, folks! Oldies walking into the Vidyaranya School auditorium to attend the indoor meeting of the 18th of August may well be forgiven for presuming that they had come to the wrong venue given the number of new members gathered there! The ID idea was in the air and Raajeev Mathew, the Expert, was going to make a presentation about the nuances of identifying birds of prey. Literally sketching his way through an hour-and-a-half long presentation on 'BOP for Beginners', Raajeev held forth on the jizz of eagles, kites, hawks, falcons, buzzards, harriers and vultures.

The jizz of a bird is its general appearance; the information we gather about its shape and size that helps us label the bird right down to the species level. So, when we are on a field trip, it is the jizz of a bird that helps us swoop down on its Order and Genus, before pinning it to a species. Raajeev advised that we first take in the aspect of the bird – its proportion, shape and size. Then observe the wings and the tail: are they long, broad, tapering or rounded? The long and short of it is that you have to be Observant. And happily for us all, that calls for a lot of birding.

Raptors send us into raptures, no doubt, but how many of us pay attention to their countenance in overhead flight, head-on silhouette, wing patterns, tail patterns, wing span, stage of plumage, *et al?* It requires perhaps nothing less than the enduring enthusiasm of a Scientist, for ID-ing birds of prey willy-nilly sets apart the serious birder from the also-rans.

Tackling the Tails

The distinguishing feature of eagles (the Genus *Aquila* of the Order Falconiformes) is their moderate tail in relation to its overall size. The Greater Spotted Eagle (*Aquila clanga*) has a tail that is rounded off better at the edges and is more flayed as compared to that of the Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Aquila pomarina*). The Eastern Steppe Eagle (*Aquila rapax nivalis*) has a tail whose outer edges are almost parallel. The Tawny Eagle (*Aquila rapax vindhiana*) has a well-rounded tail. The Imperial Eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) has a tail which is almost square-ended though it is not as "parallel" as that of the Steppe Eagle.

Going for the Heads

The nostril is round and the gape ends just underneath the eye in the Lesser Spotted Eagle. The nostril is round but the

gape ends just before the eye in the Greater Spotted Eagle. The Tawny Eagle's gape ends just beneath the eye. The gape of the Imperial Eagle, although quite narrow, ends beyond the position of the eye. The Steppe Eagle sports a wide gape that ends beyond the eye.

Sizing up the Wings

There are seven primaries in the Greater Spotted Eagle and six primaries in the Lesser Spotted Eagle. Watch out for the tapering wing of the Steppe Eagle. You will even find a triangular window with white or markings. The wing of the Imperial Eagle is relatively broader.

The Jizz of Other Raptors

Long wings and long tails typify the Harriers (Genus *Circus*). Harriers are generally slender. Buzzards (Genus *Buteo*) have wings that are long and very broad. Their tails are very broad and slightly rounded at the end. Hawks (Genus *Accipiter*) possess short, rounded wings and long tail. Kites (Genus *Milvus*) are hawks with long, forked tails. Falcons (Genus *Falco*) are smaller than kites and have long, angular, pointed wings, with a relatively short tail. Vultures (Genus *Gyps*) have very large, broad, almost rectangular wings and square or slightly rounded tails. Other vultures (Genus *Neophron*) have long, narrow, pointed wings and a wedge-shaped tail. The Egyptian or Scavenger Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) is an example.

Perhaps the time has come for each one of us to take a leaf out of Raajeev Mathew's feathery book to start drawing the jizz of birds of prey. A report about a presentation on field ID keys to raptors can at best be sketchy. But, one hopes that while referring to these sketches by Raajeev Mathew, you will prepare your own too.

So, here's wishing that your spirits soar while you mark time with the shapes and sizes of birds of prey on the fly. May the thrill of ID-ing them pat be yours today and always. What's more, it's "heads" you win, "tails" I lose if you can make head or tail of this BOP Smart ID Challenge! Wonder how much more win-win BOP birding can get?

WHERE HAVE THE SPARROWS GONE - Some Thoughts

Humayun Taher

An article in the Times of India of India of Wednesday, 20th August 2003, regarding the disappearance of House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) from the environs of the city has produced a bountiful harvest. We have received lots of letters, through email, from people of all walks of life, and all eager to share their thoughts on the problem, or telling us about small populations of Sparrows from their immediate area. One gentleman has informed us about a pair breeding near his house – another has shown concern about the large number of birds he has seen being sold at the Chowk Bird Market. Yet another has suggested a captive breeding programme to try and build up the population. Interesting, and useful as these observations are,

there is yet another aspect to them – the fact that lots of people (not necessarily concerned with bird conservation) have started to observe and show concern over the fact that House Sparrows are in danger of disappearing. This puts heart in an old birdwatcher like myself that perhaps there is some chance to get together and do something about the problem.

I remember my own childhood – we lived in a large and rambling old house in Banjara Hills, and the garden pool was a regular drinking place for dozens of the chirping critters. And it is interesting to note that, at that time, it was far more common to hurl anathemas at the birds for pecking grain, than trying to save them from extinction. If the cook had had her way in those days, it couldn't be worse than the fate which the Sparrows are facing today!

Another page from memory's book – the number of Sparrows was so large, (in *circa* 1976) that we youngsters devised a plan to imprison some of them! (I think we had heard that they make good eating!!). To that end a wire cage was liberally baited with grain and a cunning arrangement of strings was arranged from the door of the cage to the person in hiding. Although the idea was ingenious, the birds were not having any – they hopped into the cage, grabbed the grain and hopped out again with every expression of satisfaction – while the hidden *havaladar* tried in vain to make the cage door close! To no avail – the string had broken, or had snagged somewhere or something. Suffice to say that all the sparrows had a hearty feed and topped it up with a bath in the aforementioned pond and continued their nefarious activities on the grain which the cook had spread on a cloth to dry, inviting further anathemas, as before!

From that picture to the one today – it's been more than a month since I saw a Sparrow. And that was not in the city – it happened in Godavarikhani, at the Singareni Collieries Guesthouse. I saw a plump little bird sitting on a small Ashoka tree nearby and recognised it immediately. And I was amazed – because I recognised it at once in spite of the fact that it had been many a long day since I had seen one. It was a male House Sparrow, one of three hopping around, accompanied by their four wives. They made a very happy little band of birds and they can never have known that the mad human who prowled around the garden following their antics was as fascinated by them as they were by him (or his antics)!

Briefly then, it all boils down to this – that House Sparrows are presently in grave danger of disappearing from the face of the earth unless something is done, and done very quickly to save them and give them another chance at survival. Perhaps the article in the Times of India has done something in this direction – at least to the extent that it has brought to light several people interested in this cause and willing to devote time to the problem and find a possible solution. Anyone else out there who wants to come in...?

Below is a summarization of some of the letters received and mentioned above:

- 1) Mr. Viswanath Aisola writes that he is visited by 4 to 5 House Sparrows daily at a feeding bowl he has placed in his garden in Trimulgherry.
- 2) Mr. Jayaram Surender writes of his sighting of a flock of the birds in Coorg. He also feels strongly that a captive breeding/research programme should be initiated, with participation from Universities for the research aspect. (A good idea this, can anyone suggest a university/location for the captive breeding programme?).
- 3) Mr. Mazher Ali also cannot remember when last he has seen them in the city, but tells of a sighting from Moinabad.
- 4) Mrs. Lakshmi Krishnan, a BSAP member has given us a sighting of 6 birds on 6th and 7th of August. She also has promised to look out for the nests if they can be found and to keep an eye on them.
- 5) Mr. Fazal Ali Adil has mentioned seeing two pairs of the birds from the area between Mehdipatnam and Toli Chowki. He adds that one pair has disappeared, but one pair is nesting opposite his house and, from the signs, has raised a family. He shows great concern about the number of birds he has seen on sale at the Chowk market.

Perhaps, using these very concerned people as a nucleus, we can start some sort of campaign to pull the House Sparrow out of the hole it seems to have fallen into. What is urgently needed at the moment is to find out WHY the birds are declining so drastically. Theories are all very well; but facts are required here. Anyone listening...?

Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh – Final Notice dated 1st September 2003

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on 15th September 2003 (15.09.2003) at Vidyaranya High School, Saifabad. The timing of the meeting is 6.00 p.m. All members are requested to attend. The tentative programme for the meeting is given below:

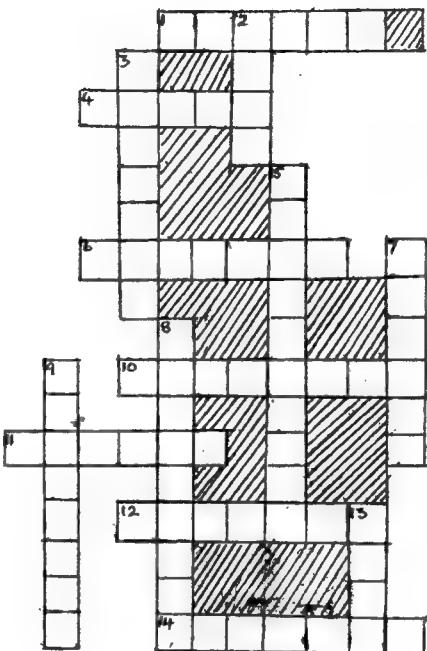
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- 5) Appointment of Auditors
- 6) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 7) Any other Business

BIRDWORD PUZZLE - No. 5

By M.M. Ali Khan

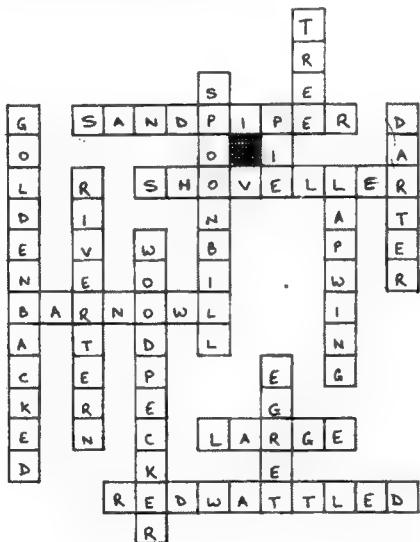
Note: Figures in Brackets denote number of alphabets
The puzzle contains bird names only
Correct solution to this puzzle will be given in the next
issue of PITTA

1. Somewhere in Margo's prey (6).
2. See (4).
3. See (4):
- 4, 2 & 3. Digital Pager Wale (5, 4, 7)
5. Home to 'pearls' before a detective agency (10).
6. See (9).
7. Gives its young for adoption (6).
8. CROON in TIME otherwise to get the bird (9).
- 9 & 6. O'Hara - a little animal lover (7, 7).
10. Dress your hair and Duck (8).
11. Where you save cash and join MANY (8).
12. Crick between head and body (7).
13. Flightless bird (4).
14. Baked large but not to eat (7).



Members are requested to send their solutions to PITTA at the Society address. The correct entries will be entered for a draw. The lucky winner receives a BSAP cap, donated by Mr. M.M. Ali Khan.

Solution to Birdword Puzzle - No. 4



AN EXPENSIVE SHOT!

A California man was fined \$20,000 and sentenced to five years probation for shooting a California Condor, the rare bird that has been on the endangered species list since the 1960's. Cole Lewis - who pleaded guilty in May to killing the condor after an extensive investigation - was also barred from hunting in the U.S.

For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

Editors: Siraj A. Taher & Humayun Taher (55612608), Raajeev Mathew (23310721)

Website: <http://www.bsaponline.org> E-mail: aasheesh@vsnl.in, humayun5@rediffmail.com

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BSAP



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Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

PROGRAMME - September and October

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 26-ix-2004: Meet at the Venue (AP Tourism Restaurant) at 6.45 a.m. Shamirpet Lake and Deer Park, Hyderabad: Secunderabad Club: Trimulgherry. This will be a half-day trip. Shamirpet Lake has a history of several interesting sightings. If you are really lucky look out for Peregrines. The Deer park will provide warblers and small woodland birds. Early migrants may be visible in the lake but mostly you will have resident waterbirds at this time. Spoonbills may be visible, maybe Ibis and Openbilled Storks. The Deer Park will give good sightings of Chital for the youngsters. Be a bit careful in the rocks for Kraits and Russell's Vipers.

Sunday, 18-x-2004: Meet at Panjagutta Cross-roads at 6.00 a.m. Narsapur Reserved Forest: Ameerpet: Sanathnagar: Dindigul Air Force Station. A woodland paradise and particularly rich in Woodpeckers. Added attractions are lots of Flycatchers. Look for the Spangled Drongo in the stream bed. There should also be several warblers around and Chloropsis. Look out for the Indian Pitta, Ground Thrush and, with luck, the Mahratta Woodpecker. Certainly there should be Paradise Flycatchers around, possibly even the Greater Blackbacked Woodpecker. In the lake, you should be able to see Cotton Teals and lots of River Terns. Keep an eye open for the Brown Fish Owl that roosts near the temple on the bund of the lake. This is a full day trip so carry packed lunches and plenty of water. And wear strong boots.

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 20th-ix-2004, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be communicated to the members and through the press.

24th-x-2004, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be communicated to the members and through the press.

NOTES & NEWS

BSAP FIELD VISIT TO CHILKUR DEER PARK, HYDERABAD - Sunday, 1st August 2004.

By Sheetal Vyas

August, and members of BSAP wound their way to the Mrugavani deer park in Chilkur again. Last year's trip was dogged by rain and we had a disappointingly low turnout of birds. This year we hoped would be better. Well, at least it didn't rain, but the birds were still AWOL.

Even before we reached the park, a Tree Pie afforded us the first sighting of the day. Once inside the park, first to greet us was a red-wattled lapwing that screeched its familiar call as it flew overhead. More birders arrived and a golden oriole swooped across delighting us with its fluty whistle. As we stood waiting for more numbers to join us, Aasheesh spotted several bulbuls including a white browed darting in and out of a tree, whose fruit seemed to be a big attraction.

As we started to walk, insects seemed to be much in evidence. Karuna Shah was excited to find red velvet mites, which were seen in such profusion that we had to be careful to avoid stepping

on them. Kiran Katikaneni also identified a six spotted tiger beetle for us.

An Iora stopped by to say hello and we saw a couple of Warblers as well. Also, we saw Sunbirds, a couple of Brahminy Mynas, and a branch lined with several Green Bee-eaters. A couple of Hoopoes hopped about on the ground and we spied a Little Brown Dove as well.

The birds were missing from the next part of the walk and we turned our gazes from the skies to the path under our feet. Conversation thrived and Shafaat Uncle introduced us to the nuances between 'poisonous' and 'venomous' and the defence systems of the millipede vis-à-vis the centipede. Most fascinating!

We heard peafowl call raucously as we reached the watch tower. Here, we sat down rather single-mindedly to a hearty snack of sandwiches and biscuits. On the rocks around us, was a rock gecko that Kiran Katikaneni informed us was called the Rock Agama. Before our very eyes, the lizard metamorphosed from a robust orange into a dull grey-brown! Next, a Shikra gave us a quick flyby but no chance at a longer second look.

Fed and refreshed, we walked on. By the little pond, Aasheesh heard a Tickell's Flycatcher in a copse, but while we heard the bird again, we weren't lucky enough to sight it. Here, we saw a Small Minivet as it came down briefly into a patch of sun.

The other pond added nothing to our list and we wound our way back to the parking lot, made up for the lack of birds with conversation and called it a day.

Disaster At Sea As Global Warming Hits Seabirds

By Michael McCarthy

(Environment Editor: The Independent - UK : 7-30-4)

Hundreds of thousands of Scottish seabirds have failed to breed this summer in a wildlife catastrophe which is being linked by scientists directly to global warming.

The massive unprecedented collapse of nesting attempts by several seabird species in Orkney and Shetland is likely to prove the first major impact of climate change on Britain.

In what could be a sub-plot from the recent disaster movie, *The Day After Tomorrow*, a rise in sea temperature is believed to have led to the mysterious disappearance of a key part of the marine food chain - the sandeel, the small fish whose great teeming shoals have hitherto sustained larger fish, marine mammals and seabirds in their millions.

In Orkney and Shetland, the sandeel stocks have been shrinking for several years, and this summer they have disappeared: the result for seabirds has been mass starvation. The figures for breeding failure, for Shetland in particular, almost defy belief.

More than 172,000 breeding pairs of guillemots were recorded in the islands in the last national census, *Seabird 2000*, whose results were published this year; this summer the birds have produced almost no young, according to Peter Ellis, Shetland area manager for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Martin Heubeck of Aberdeen University, who has monitored Shetland seabirds for 30 years, said: "The breeding failure of the guillemots is unprecedented in Europe." More than 6,800 pairs of great Skuas were recorded in Shetland in the same census; this year they have produced a handful of chicks - perhaps fewer than 10 - while the arctic Skuas (1,120 pairs in the census) have failed to produce any surviving young.

The 24,000 pairs of arctic terns, and the 16,700 pairs of Shetland kittiwakes - small gulls - have "probably suffered complete failure", said Mr. Ellis.

In Orkney the picture is very similar, although detailed figures are not yet available. "It looks very bad," said the RSPB's warden on Orkney mainland, Andy Knight. "Very few of the birds have raised any chicks at all."

The counting and monitoring is still going on and the figures are by no means complete: it is likely that puffins, for example, will

also have suffered massive breeding failure but because they nest deep in burrows, this is not immediately obvious.

But the astonishing scale of what has taken place is already clear - and the link to climate change is being openly made by scientists. It is believed that the microscopic plankton on which tiny sandeel larvae feed are moving northwards as the sea water warms, leaving the baby fish with nothing to feed on.

This is being seen in the North Sea in particular, where the water temperature has risen by 2C in the past 20 years, and where the whole ecosystem is thought to be undergoing a "regime shift", or a fundamental alteration in the interaction of its component species. "Think of the North Sea as an engine, and plankton as the fuel driving it," said Euan Dunn of the RSPB, one of the world's leading experts on the interaction of fish and seabirds. "The fuel mix has changed so radically in the past 20 years, as a result of climate change, that the whole engine is now sputtering and starting to malfunction. All of the animals in the food web above the plankton, first the sandeels, then the larger fish like cod, and ultimately the seabirds, are starting to be affected."

Research last year clearly showed that the higher the temperature, the less sandeels could maintain their population level, said Dr Dunn. "The young sandeels are simply not surviving."

Although over-fishing of sandeels has caused breeding failures in the past, the present situation could not be blamed on fishing, he said. The Shetland sandeel fishery was catching so few fish that it was closed as a precautionary measure earlier this year. "Climate change is a far more likely explanation."

The spectacular seabird populations of the Northern Isles have a double importance. They are of great value scientifically, holding, for example, the world's biggest populations of great Skuas. And they are of enormous value to Orkney and Shetland tourism, being the principal draw for many visitors. The national and international significance of what has happened is only just beginning to dawn on the wider political and scientific community, but some leading figures are already taking it on board.

"This is an incredible event," said Tony Juniper, director of Friends of the Earth. "The catastrophe [of these] seabirds is just a foretaste of what lies ahead."

"It shows that climate change is happening now, [with] devastating consequences here in Britain, and it shows that reducing the pollution causing changes to the earth's climate should now be the global number one political priority."

Urban Birding

by

The City Bird-Brain

Someone asked me, the other day, "How come you spend most of your weekend sitting in the balcony with those funny glasses stuck in your eyes?" (I think he was referring

to my binoculars but, since I also wear spectacles, I'm not quite sure.) Needless to say, I gave him a hearty lecture on the joys of birding, which I for one thoroughly enjoyed. The poor chap looked quite shaken by the time I had finished and I have not seen him since!

Since the last column, no one has written a complaint about the writing, and the editors appear to like my contribution sufficiently to warrant its staying on. I am much gratified by this and I hope to continue to bore you with my incoherent narratives on a monthly basis. Henceforward we will start to concentrate on individual bird species.

A word of caution, if the reader expects to find descriptions of how to identify birds, this is quite the wrong place for that. Ideally, for identification, a field guide is required and is generally sufficient. What I have to say in these notes is the matter that does not appear in field guides. Hopefully, some day these memoirs may prove to be of some use.

The "funny glasses" have produced a bountiful harvest already. I have added several new species of birds to my "balcony list". There is now a matter of some 17 species on my list. It gives me confidence that my system of attraction is working and the birds are appreciative of it. Since the rains have set in with a vengeance, they have little need for water, but food is readily appreciated, and so is the shelter that the balcony provides. I have seen a couple of rather bedraggled little sparrows – thoroughly soaked and looking quite miserable, but still able to chirp cheerfully at the sight of the grain tray. I think, this month, we will concentrate on these little chaps.

Most of us are, by now, only too aware of the alarming decline of the House Sparrow populations in the cities where, until a few years ago, they swarmed in impressive numbers. We will not dwell on that phenomenon here because it has already been covered in earlier issues of *Pitta* (No. 149 September 2003). What I would like to say here is more concerned with the birds themselves rather than their increased rarity.

Anyone who has visited the area I live in (on the outskirts of Pune city) will refuse to believe that the House Sparrow is in danger of extinction. There are, quite literally, dozens of the birds around. I have even managed to count a flock of no less than 20 birds (8 males and 12 females). That was by far the largest flock I have seen around, but scattered specimens are seen here and there all over the place. This prompts the question whether these birds have found some source of food and accommodation in this city, or whether they are here only temporarily and will vanish the way they have done in other cities throughout their erstwhile range.

I think that the birds do manage to find both food and accommodation here. Pune city still has a fair number of independent houses (though the trend is rapidly changing towards apartment houses), and the housewife still prefers to

clean the rice herself (and throw out a fair bit of grain, or keep grain to dry in the sun). This bonanza of food, plus the various nooks and crannies available as capital nesting sites in the independent houses are the magnet that draws the Sparrows. I have seen a nest constructed rather precariously on a ceiling fan (the fan was not working and the birds found it ideal apparently for their nest). I have also seen the aforementioned flock of 20 birds hopping around outside the grinding mill (where there is a profusion of grain to be found). And when I am perched on my balcony of an afternoon, a couple of the birds put in an appearance at the grain tray and hop around chirping happily. I have even had one inquisitive hen sparrow hopping onto the rim of my tea mug and peering hopefully inside. Unfortunately for the bird, the mug proved empty. This is not counting the bedraggled specimens referred to earlier. All of which gives me much encouragement that I will be able to show my children the House Sparrow as a live article rather than a moth-eaten museum specimen or a photograph in a book.

And now a question – without looking at a field guide, can anyone tell me the plumage of a male House Sparrow? I doubt if many would be able to do so. I know for a certainty that I cannot – because I do not know it. I can identify the bird immediately I see one, but I am incapable of actually describing it. And I venture to think that this is quite a common problem. Has anyone noticed the rather elegant-looking black bib on the chin of the male House Sparrow? The russet colour of his back contrasts well with the dusty grey-brown of his belly and the black and white throat pattern. It makes the creature look quite natty. His wife is clothed more soberly in a more-or-less uniform shade of brown-grey. She has a few streaks and spots scattered here and there, of course, but that is to be expected from a bird that works so hard and does so much throughout the day. A few spots on the apron of the cook are unavoidable.

I will say again that so far from showing signs of disappearing from this area, the House Sparrows are actually on the increase. I do not, of course, know how long this happy position will last. Already the houses are being demolished and replaced by that hideous creation, the modern apartment block, which is of no use to the House Sparrows since it provides neither shelter nor sustenance. Still, in my own small way, I am trying to offer apologies to the birds for living in an apartment block myself. They seem appreciative enough though I fancy that I can detect a faintly reproachful note in the chirping of the birds on my balcony. But this could be the result of a far too active imagination.

In conclusion then, I must again apologise for the incoherence of these memoirs, and reiterate that if the readers have some ideas that would make the narrative less incoherent and more meaningful, they are kindly requested to write in. Keep watching the House Sparrows. Till next month – happy birding!!

Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh – First (1st) Notice dated 15th August 2004

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on 18th October 2004 (18.10.2004) at Vidyaranya High School, Saifabad. The timing of the meeting is 6.00 p.m. All members are requested to attend. The tentative programme for the meeting is given below:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 6) Any other Business

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Membership (Rs): Admission=100; Annual=200; Student=100 per annum. Life=2,000. Add Rs.25/- for outstation cheques.

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PROGRAMME

FIELD OUTING: Members are requested to assemble at the main entrance by 7.00 am. Transportation within the campus will be arranged. There should be lots of migrants around, particularly the waterbirds. This will be a half-day trip. Carry snacks and water. For further information contact Siraj Taher (55612608) or Shafaat Ulla (23353098) before 11am or after 4pm.

Sunday, 25-iv-2004: Kasu Brahmananda Reddy (KBR) National Park, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad: This will be a morning trip. Sightings of Black-winged Kites and Ashy Woodswallow can be expected as well as plenty of warblers and scrubland birds. The lake has very little water so waterbirds could be scarce. Carry plenty of water and snacks.

INDOOR MEETING: 19-iv-2004, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be intimated through the "engagements" columns of daily newspapers.

NOTES & NEWS

Bharatpur: But, where are the cranes?

J.V.D. Moorty

The morning of 18th February saw 14 members gather at the Secunderabad railway station. Destination: Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur. The punctual departure of the train had all of us planning the birding very animatedly and excitedly over a sumptuous pot-luck breakfast. The punctuality was however short-lived. At lunchtime, the train came to a halt and stayed that way. Enquiries revealed that a goods train had derailed about 50km ahead. The result: we fell behind by 8 hours. The morning after saw us birding from the train and we arrived in Agra at 11.30 hrs. – 6 hours behind schedule. We hurriedly and excitedly boarded the two Sumos that had been arranged by Zaki – thanks a heap Zaki – one of our new members stationed strategically in Agra. Hotel Sunbird, Bharatpur was to be our roost. The hotel is located just about 200 metres from the entrance to the park. After having lunch and dusting off the train journey, we made our way to the park. Entrance fee of Rs. 25/- per head. As we had only half a day of birding in hand it was decided that we walk. And a rather long walk it was! 1.7km to the inner barrier and thence to the birding tracks. Birding was interesting. A Red-breasted Flycatcher flitting low down had our attention, but I also saw the Grey-headed Flycatcher higher up in the branches. A black-naped hare ambled off at our approach to quieter environs. The nest of a Dusky Eagle-Owl had every one peering to get a look at the chick. We did get more than an eyeful the next day though. We were welcomed to the trail by a Sparrowhawk. A White-cheeked Bulbul sang us a welcome while a White-browed Bulbul gurgled away happily. There were plenty of ducks, herons and egrets in

the water, but the highlight of the early evening was the magnificent Imperial Eagle who swooped in low over us and settled down on the top of a dry tree stump in the water offering everyone a very good view of his superb visage. After about 2 kms half the group turned back while the other half continued the circuit and was rewarded with the view of White-necked Storks, and a single Mallard. With dusk coming in, it was closing time for the park and we all headed back to the hotel for the much needed rest and refreshment. The two-and-a-half hour walk had provided an interesting total of 65+ species, and an appetite as well. A word about the hotel and the food – rooms are well furnished with comfortable rooms, but could have done with some more room. Food and service was very good, nobody went hungry for the want of not finding the food palatable. An early morning start the next day had us all cycling in or being ferried by cycle-rickshaws. The rickshaw pullers have a keen eye and also having learnt their birdwatching on site, so to speak, know exactly where to find what. They are rather good with their IDs of the birds! We spent the entire next day in the park until dusk. High on the list of birds seen was the Black Bittern, Brown Crake, White-tailed and the Sociable Lapwing. The number of eagles that were soaring had us all leafing through our books trying to get our identifications right. Jackals were in season and staking territorial claims. We watched a couple of them feeding on a carcass along with some Greater-spotted eagles and Egyptian Vultures. Meanwhile, I managed to strike up conversation with a local guide who led me to a bonanza of 8 pythons sunning themselves!! The third day had Aasheesh, Kiran and myself leaving at 7 a.m. for the park in the company of a researcher from SACON,

Dutta, and his guide, Randhir Singh. The latter produced the Long-tailed Nightjar, Tickell's Thrush and the Orange-headed Thrush on demand! After an absorbing three hours of birding we met up with the rest of the group. After birding together for an hour I went ahead with the guide to look for the Yellow-wattled Lapwings, Indian Courser and the Sociable Lapwings. The latter were unfortunately too far away. While on the way back met Vishnu and Ashwin and Randhir Singh promptly fulfilled their desire to see pythons and showed them three more at another place! Our total bird list an impressive 157 species. The only regret – we didn't get to see the Siberian Cranes. Lunch was followed by packing up and leaving for Agra. The group split up – to see the Taj and to shop – and met up at the station. The return journey was spent reliving some of the moments of the trip. Arrival home on Sunday; 22nd Feb. was delayed owing to a prominent political party holding a rally. But then with Bharatpur behind us the delay was of no consequence! A brief word about the park, I feel, is in order. Originally known as 'Ghana', meaning 'thicket', referring to the dense forest, which used to cover the area, Keoladeo – the name derives from an ancient Hindu temple, devoted to Lord Shiva, which stands at the centre of the park – and then later as Bharatpur, Keoladeo National Park is a shallow wetland of 2,873ha enclosed by a 2m high stone wall. It lies in a natural depression 172-175m above sea level at the western end of the chain of freshwater wetlands lying along the Indogangetic plains. It is situated 2km southeast of Bharatpur City and 57 kms west of Agra on the Agra-Jaipur highway. While many of India's parks have been developed from the hunting preserves of princely India, Keoladeo Ghana is perhaps the only case where the habitat has been created by a maharaja. In earlier times, Bharatpur town used to be flooded regularly every monsoon. The southwest monsoon (end of June-September) provides an average 660mm of rainfall over 32 rainy days. In 1760, an earthern dam (Ajan Dam) was constructed, to save the town, from this annual vagary of nature. The depression created by extraction of soil for the dam was cleared and this became the Keoladeo lake. At the beginning of the last century, the lake was developed and was divided into several portions. A system of small dams, dykes, sluice gates, etc., was created to control water level in different sections. This became the hunting preserve of the Bharatpur royalty in the 1850s, and one of the best duck - shooting wetlands in the world. Hunting was prohibited by mid-60s. The area was partly man-made with earthen dykes dividing the area into blocks and sluice gates controlling the flow of water to and from the blocks. This system is still in use today. In 1956 the area was declared a Bird Sanctuary, although the Maharajah retained the shooting rights for birds and other animals until 1972. It was declared a national park on 10 March 1982. The park was declared a Ramsar site in 1981 in recognition of its value as a unique man-made freshwater wetland which serves as a staging ground for migratory waterfowl and forms an important wintering ground for the threatened Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* (IUCN Red List, 1994). It was declared a World Heritage site in 1985. The park is surrounded by nine villages with a total population of ca. 20,000 people who originally depended on the park for

fuel, fodder, timber, etc. They ceased to have any rights after the declaration of the National Park. The aquatic vegetation is rich and includes 96 species of submerged and emergent plants as well as a diversity of scrub forests including woodlands, scrub woodlands, woodland savannahs, shrub savannahs, and grass savannahs consisting of various floristic combinations of the following trees and grasses, *Mitragyna parvifolia*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Ziziphus mauritiana*, *Prosopis cineraria*, *Acacia leucophloea*, *Acacia nilotica*, *Capparis sepiaria*, *Vetiveria zizanioides*, *Desmostachya bipinnata* and *Cynodon dactylon*. A total of 350 species of plants have been recorded in this small area. This diversity of plant life supports a high vertebrate diversity, including fish (50 species), amphibians (5 species), reptiles (28 species), birds (ca. 400 species), and mammals (29 species). Of the bird species present a significant number are considered globally threatened (IUCN Red List, 1994) including Dalmation Pelican, Grey Pelican, Adjutant Stork, Lesser Adjutant Stork, Baikal Teal, Baer's Pochard, Marbled Teal, Cinereous Vulture, Imperial Eagle, Pallas's Fishing Eagle, Siberian Crane and Sociable Lapwing. Threatened mammals recorded within the park include Bengal Fox, Fishing Cat and Smooth Indian Otter (IUCN Red List, 1994). Water is of critical importance for the health of this wetland. Although once a flood prone area, water became scarce after the construction of the Panchna dam in the catchment area and Keoladeo now faces drought, barring years of exceptionally good rainfall. The Rajasthan Government has taken a decision to give the park priority over the irrigation needs of the farmers. Of the two sources of water available to the park, the Yamuna River is not desirable because of the high level of pollutants, and drawing water from the Chambal River involves considerable expenditure since the river is at a lower level than the park and water has to be pumped. Overall, a permanent solution to the water supply problem at Keoladeo is yet to be found. What is peculiar to Bharatpur, is that many of the species are specialist feeders, like the Siberian crane. Each helps itself to one ingredient of the wetland soup. Flamingos sieve the water for plankton, spoonbills rake the mud with their lower mandibles for mollusks, tadpoles and weed, while egrets and herons spear their prey, and geese and brahminy ducks graze at the water's edge. The Keoladeo herony is full of fervent activity. This unique mix of marshes, pastures and woodland and the floral communities at Keoladeo is the key to the high density and diversity of flora and fauna. A must for every bird-lover, nay, every nature lover!

Parrot's oratory stuns scientists

Alex Kirby

BBC News Online environment correspondent

The finding of a parrot with an almost unparalleled power to communicate with people has brought scientists up short.

The bird, a captive African grey called N'kisi, has a vocabulary of 950 words, and shows signs of a sense of humour.

He invents his own words and phrases if he is confronted with novel ideas with which his existing repertoire cannot cope - just as a human child would do.

N'kisi's remarkable abilities, which are said to include telepathy, feature in the latest BBC Wildlife Magazine.

N'kisi is believed to be one of the most advanced users of human language in the animal world.

About 100 words are needed for half of all reading in English, so if N'kisi could read he would be able to cope with a wide range of material.

Polished wordsmith

He uses words in context, with past, present and future tenses, and is often inventive.

One N'kisi-ism was "flied" for "flew", and another "pretty smell medicine" to describe the aromatherapy oils used by his owner, an artist based in New York.

When he first met Dr Jane Goodall, the renowned chimpanzee expert, after seeing her in a picture with apes, N'kisi said: "Got a chimp?"

He appears to fancy himself as a humourist. When another parrot hung upside down from its perch, he commented: "You got to put this bird on the camera."

Dr Goodall says N'kisi's verbal fireworks are an "outstanding example of interspecies communication".

In an experiment, the bird and his owner were put in separate rooms and filmed as the artist opened random envelopes containing picture cards.

Analysis showed the parrot had used appropriate keywords three times more often than would be likely by chance.

Captives' frustrations

This was despite the researchers discounting responses like "What ya doing on the phone?" when N'kisi saw a card of a man with a telephone, and "Can I give you a hug?" with one of a couple embracing.

Professor Donald Broom, of the University of Cambridge's School of Veterinary Medicine, said: "The more we look at the cognitive abilities of animals, the more advanced they appear, and the biggest leap of all has been with parrots."

Alison Hales, of the World Parrot Trust, told BBC News Online: "N'kisi's amazing vocabulary and sense of humour should make everyone who has a pet parrot consider whether they are meeting its needs.

"They may not be able to ask directly, but parrots are long-lived, and a bit of research now could mean an improved quality of life for years."

Announcement

Suhel Quader

I am looking for someone to assist me in my work on the behaviour of some Indian cuckoos and their hosts. Fieldwork will take place between mid-May and end-September 2004 in the vicinity of Madanapalle (near Horsley Hills), Chittoor Dist., Andhra Pradesh. The work will involve netting and banding birds, searching for and monitoring nests, recording calls and conducting playback experiments, and conducting behavioural observations. The person would be free to work part-time on any other project that may interest him or her. Possible side projects include

work on pollination and seed dispersal of Lantana, distribution and abundance of aquatic invertebrates, and the behaviour of agama lizards. I should be able to cover travel (within India) and living expenses in the field, and may be able to add a stipend (depending on the experience of the person). Requirements: You should have a strong interest in biology and natural history, and be able to spend at least three months in the field. I would prefer someone who can identify common scrubforest birds by sight and sound. Insect and plant identification skills will also be helpful. Please email me with a brief description of your background and interests pertaining to biology and natural history.

Suhel Quader, PhD, Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge, Downing Street, Cambridge CB2 3EJ, UK.
Email: sq210@cam.ac.uk. Ph: +44-1223-767130

Obituary: E. Hanumantha Rao (1930-2004)

Renowned wildlife photographer Eshwar Hanumantha Rao passed away Bangalore in the wee hours on Wednesday following severe brain haemorrhage. He was 74. His last rites were performed at the Wilson Garden crematorium on Wednesday afternoon. He is survived by his wife Rathna Bai.

Born in 1930, Mr Rao had the unique distinction of contributing photographs to more than 1,700 publications including National Geographic, Life, Reader's Digest, Encyclopedia Britannica, Time, Microsoft and BBC. In India, uncountable journals and magazines have tapped his resources.

It is said that whenever Mr Rao visited a forest, a beautiful tusker would come and pose for him. He had some memorable moments in this career spanning more than 50 years. His passion for capturing the natural world took him to the length and breadth of the country more than 17 times. USA, UK, Germany, France, Spain, Switzerland and Japan were few of the endless list of countries from where his work was marketed.

He was a Melvin Jones Fellow and also a member of several conservation and wildlife committees in the past. Some of the awards and achievements of Mr Rao include: European honour of Association of Federation of International Art Photography in the year 1960; Rajyotsava Award in 1986; Kodak award for Photographic Excellence in 1987; Karnataka State Environment award in 1993; and Karnataka Lalitha Kala Academy award for the year 1997-98.

Renowned photographer and fellow of Royal Photographic Society Allum Prabhu said with the demise of Mr Rao, the world has lost the wildlife photography don and a most experienced person in wildlife photography. The Karnataka State Photographers' Association while mourning the death of Mr Rao said the photographers have lost a god-father and an icon in the arena of wildlife photography. (Deccan Herald, January 22, 2004.).

Books & Journals received

The BSAP reading room received the following books and journals / periodicals during October—December 2003.

Books

1. Bird Conservation Nepal. 21st Annual Report. 2002/03. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie (AP).]
2. Lawton, John H. & Robert M. May (Editors) (1995). *Extinction rates*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. [Donated by Smt. Usha Sriram].
3. Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History. Annual Report 2002-2003. [Donated by AP].
4. Sutherland, William J. (2001). *The conservation handbook: Research, management & policy*. Blackwell Science Ltd. Oxford. [Donated by The Conservation Handbook Gratis Copies Project]. Two copies received.

Journals / Periodicals

1. *Birds*. Vol. 19. No. 8. Winter 2003. [Exchange copy].
2. *Birdwatchers' Digest*. Vol. 26. No. 1. September/October 2003. [Donated by AP].
3. *Birdwatchers' Digest*. Vol. 26. No. 3. January/February 2004. [Donated by AP].
4. *Conservation Biology*. Vol. 17. No. 5. October 2003 [Donated by ATree Foundation].
5. *Conservation Biology*. Vol. 17. No. 6. December 2003 [Donated by ATree Foundation].
6. *Gobar Times*. No. 36. [Donated by AP].
7. *Gobar Times*. No. 38. [Donated by AP].
8. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. No. 11. October 31, 2003. [Donated by AP].
9. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. No. 12. November 15, 2003. [Donated by AP].
10. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. No. 13. November 30, 2003. [Donated by AP].

11. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. No. 14. December 15, 2003. [Donated by AP].
12. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. No. 15. December 31, 2003. [Donated by AP].
13. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. No. 16. January 15, 2004. [Donated by AP].
14. *Down to Earth. Supplement (Mercury Menace)*. No. 1. [Donated by AP].
15. *Down to Earth. Supplement (Forests)*. No. 3. [Donated by AP].
16. *Down to Earth. Supplement (Water)*. No. 2. [Donated by AP].
17. *Hornbill*. July-September 2003. [Donated by AP].
18. *Mistnet*. Vol. 4. No. 2. April-June 2003. [Exchange copy].
19. *Oriental Bird Club Bulletin*. No. 38. December 2003. [Exchange copy].
20. *Protected Area Update*. No. 45. October 2003. [Exchange copy].
21. *Protected Area Update*. No. 46. December 2003. [Exchange copy].
22. *Suara Enggang*. No. 5. September-October 2003. [Exchange copy].
23. *Suara Enggang*. No. 6. November-December 2003 [Exchange copy].
24. *Samsad News*. Vol. 21. Nos. 11&12. November-December 2003. [Exchange copy].
25. *World Birdwatch*. Vol. 25. No. 4. December 2003. [Exchange copy].

LETTER FROM AN INSECT-HUNTING ORNITHOLOGIST-63.**Our bird surveys and publications, habitat protection and restoration****4. OTHER SURVEYS**

Yet another method that can be usefully employed in habitat surveys is the transect. This is a detailed record of all birds seen on, say, a long train journey, or a voyage by boat up a river, or a long trek on foot. In each case, of course, an exact note is made of the habitat through which one happens to be passing at the time each bird is seen. Transect reports might have a good deal of value if there were a large number of them covering the same route at all times of the year, but their very nature is inseparable from incompleteness and inexactitude, though observations taken on a trek on foot will naturally be fuller and more accurate than those made from a moving vehicle.

...The study of the habitats of a particular species or group of species would be an interesting task for someone with few restrictions on time or travel, but really a survey of this kind requires the co-operation of a large number of observers in different parts of the country, especially in so large a country as India, working under some central direction. A very useful preliminary would be the cataloguing of all the different habitats occurring there.

...If...an area is watched year after year it will be seen that the character of the vegetation changes as the plants become more congested and new layers of humus are added from the fallen and decayed leaves. One particular plant will succeed better than the others and will tend to crowd the others out. As time goes on the small first stage plants will be succeeded by larger plants and trees and eventually the climax vegetation (usually similar to that of the surrounding country) will be reached beyond which the succession does not go. Plant ecologists call this succession of vegetation a 'sere'. As the vegetation changes so the bird associations found there will change, and a complete survey through all the stages of a succession would be a most valuable contribution to ecology.

A rather similar kind of succession can be found where virgin jungle is cleared and the ground turned over to crops; or where a town is extended outwards into what has previously been countryside. Forest fires, earthquakes, landslides, prolonged flooding, extreme drought, plagues of insects and so on can all initiate a greater or lesser vegetational succession in which the sequence of bird associations is worth studying. Change is always taking place and the record of how any particular change affects the bird population is interesting and valuable.

Certain trees and crops prove an attraction for some birds. When the Red Silk Cotton trees (*Bombax malabaricum*) are in bloom, numbers of birds can be seen about the large flowers. Whether they are after the nectar, the dew collected in the cup of the blossom, or the insects attracted by the nectar is not known for certain, and this is a question which

photography might well be able to answer. Probably the truth lies in a combination of all three, as not all of the many species of birds seen at the flowers are habitual insect-eaters...

Commensalism is another allied subject that has so far received comparatively little attention. Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*), mynas and wagtails can often be seen foraging about grazing cattle and it is known that they obtain benefit from doing so in the form of insects disturbed from the grass by the movements of the beasts. Just what benefit birds find from foraging or consorting together is less clear. What, for instance, is the underlying reason for small birds to join together in mixed hunting parties, or for Rosy Pastors (*Pastor roseus*), for instance, to join together in flocks of their own kind, outside the breeding season? Is the only reason that wagtails roost together the shortage of suitable roosting places? Why do birds nest and live in-colonies like the Weaver Birds? These are all questions to which no final answer has yet been found.

5. CONCLUSION

Bird ecology is only in its infancy and there is enormous scope for experiment and research. Teams of observers, each one an expert in his own subject, are ideal for the full study of a limited area and the structure of the community inhabiting it, but a single watcher working on his own can still do a lot of useful work. The control of some central body directing the activities of numerous observers spread over the whole country is essential to the success of some kinds of investigation; in the British Isles this function is fulfilled by the British Trust for Ornithology. This central body should also act as a clearing and storage house for individual reports and records, even if they are never published, where they may be available for reference and comparison by other workers. In its present state almost any contribution to ecological knowledge is likely to be useful, provided only that it is accurate.

[M.D. Lister, 1951, "Birds and Ecology," *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*, 50: 154-156.]

The above quotations complete my selections from M.D. Lister's initial general paper on "Birds and Ecology." This was followed by other specific papers on bird associations he encountered, especially in Bengal (undivided then), in the jungle, in cultivated and waste lands, besides in built-up areas. He completed his writings on Indian birds with a small paper on the secondary song of some birds here and a larger faunistic survey of the Ornithology of the Darjeeling area, which treated a total of 167 species. I have found these 74 pages of Lister's writings extremely useful and in these Letters of mine, dealing with ecology, I have used his papers to try and direct the attention of my readers to what field observations each one could make and take notes on what would be valuable contributions to Indian Ornithology. Such publications (or even unpublished notes saved and deposited with a reliable institution) have sadly reduced in number nowadays in major ornithological periodicals here (except for the "Miscellaneous Notes" in *J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc.*), unlike earlier, in the magnificent, almost single-handed, *Stray Feathers* (1872—1888) of A.O. Hume, who fashioned 11 sumptuous volumes of interesting and inspiring text, or later in the *Records of the Indian Museum* (now of the Zoological Survey of India), the *JBNHS* and, minimally, in *Pavo*. Several foreign journals and bulletins, etc., also carried papers and notes on Indian sub-continent avifauna and Aasheesh Pittie is building a bibliography, on CD-Rom discs, on whatever has been published about our area's wild birds and his database has already passed the 20,000 citations mark! Several of our 'computer literate' birders spend much time sending lists of birds (only names, unfortunately, not much else) seen and identified by them on their field trips or on a day's walk or drive. I however believe that many of their IDs, especially of the rarer bird species or those with many "subspecies," could be erroneous, if not highly suspect, and need to be confirmed by experts before acceptance in databases. Krys Kazmierczak's otherwise reasonably accurate maps in his *FIELD GUIDE* (2000) carry some highly questionable locality records, especially from Goa. It also shows some remarkable records of common mainland bird species from the Middle Andaman Island where the capital city, Port Blair, is situated! Unless e-mailed data are formally published in one of our few printed periodicals (journals, bulletins, newsletters), they are not available to ornithologists like myself, or others world-wide (or to Science), to be able to include in our databases, nor can Pittie include such e-mailed messages (even if containing important unpublished records) in his commendable bibliography now in progress. The *BIRDSPOT* CD-Rom database [see *Pitta* (n.s.), 1(1): 3-4; 2004] is laudatory but this software needs to be checked and evaluated for possible errors in IDs by specialists and then formally published with reference to earlier documented data.

The *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*, *Pavo*, *Blackbuck*, *Pitta*, *Mayura* (unfortunately infrequent in appearance nowadays) and a few others, of limited pages and poorly circulated, with unfortunately small membership/subscriber lists, are publishing some observations of our bird watchers, but these are few and far between. The *NLBW* perhaps carries much of whatever writings that appear every year on our bird diversity, but with its once active 'Editorial Board' (with persons of the stature of S_lim Ali, Biswamoy Biswas, Jamal Ara, K.S. Lavkumar, to name a few—but never Humayun Abdulali, curiously) defunct since 1976, the current editorial credibility of its founding and sustaining Editor, Zafar Futehally, has suffered somewhat, in my opinion, and the *NLBW* has generally continued to only assume a "Pop Ornithology" role and character, belying its once very achievable potential to become a leading ornithological journal of India [see my "Critique" in *NLBW* 13(8): 1-5; 1973 and my "Serious Birdwatching" in *NLBW* 16(8): 1-6; 1976]. Even *Pitta*, with its telegraphic *BIRDING NOTES* section, and little more besides of original field observations, has disappointed me somewhat and perhaps its editors will think seriously of expanding its *PIGEON POST* section by including short scientific notes of members, every month, of their birding exploits that turn up new, true and important data, for the everlasting benefit of Ornithology?

Last year's S_lim Ali birth anniversary (12th November) was used by the Bombay Natural History Society to release the second and third joint number of the 100th Volume of the *JBNHS* (see *Hornbill* Oct-Dec 2003, pp. 28-36 for

photographs of the event. Curiously, Hornbill has no Volume or issue numbers but this was the 107th number, which completed 28 years of its publication). Aasheesh Pittie contributed a paper on the contents (total page numbers and correct dates of publication, mainly) of this once magnificent but even now about the only regular, world class, journal publishing on Indian Natural History today. Birders contributing almost weekly to internet subscriber mailing lists complain of publication outlets and difficulties with the editorial process and something needs to be done to absorb and publish, formally, several area/sub-area/sub-sub-area or even smaller area check-lists and other bird observations that remain ephemeral (like the monsoonal herb flora!) on the internet and then get forgotten, being inaccessible generally to computer "illiterates," even if archived for subscribers, and oblivious to serious ornithologists, resulting in a colossal waste of time, really.

Last year's issue of the JBNHS (Volume 100, Number 1, April 2003) carried articles and notes submitted or accepted as long ago as 2 to 3 years earlier and the latest Mayura (Vol. 16, 2003) includes manuscripts received a dozen years ago! Quick publication, I believe, is essential for announcing scientific fact and its subsequent effect or use, and such delays pique authors and force them to use the internet, just to skywrite their discoveries. My own journal Humea and an irregular forum Perdicula also await interesting and important manuscripts from bird watchers and ornithologists and will carry my own original observations and area survey reports. These and other Indian and foreign periodicals (like Forktail, OCB Bulletin, etc.) would prosper and play a useful role as carriers of valuable bird data that the increasing ornithological community of our sub-continent is logging nowadays. See also Zafar Futehally's comments on "Regional Newsletters" [sic] on the editorial page in NLBW 43(4) (this and the back cover pages are curiously unnumbered, and why, I fail to see!). But unless we birders (a pathetic handful in an immense granary of Indians!) all subscribe to our major ornithological and natural history publications continuously and contribute writings based on our records and observations, gotten through hard field work, for possible formal publication and a permanent place in ornithological literature, I believe most of us birders are being foolishly selfish by losing out on our individual written and published achievements through a waste of time spent birding just for personal pleasure, since our important observations will still go unpublished. **Observe-Record-Research-Write-Publish** is what every bird lover with good basic life science education (in school, at least) needs to remember and try to do.

Writing is an art, like editing and publishing are matters of technical skill and experience. Bird watchers, especially beginners or those who dread or procrastinate in putting pen to paper (or fingers to a typewriter and computer keyboard) perhaps really need some help and guidance, so that it becomes a pleasurable and easier job. I myself am prepared to help anyone who asks and then sends me manuscripts, by post or e-mail, since I consider this very very important if we are to translate our increasing bird watcher numbers into databases for the scientific and amateur naturalist community, worldwide. Now that we in India have a rising generation of well educated and informed persons, we must also emphasize quality over quantity, if we aren't to be swamped and misled by much 'eco-junk' that is currently being fed to readers in newspapers and magazines and the like, and even on the internet, by poorly trained and experienced 'nature lovers' or self-proclaimed environmentalists. It is this very "environmentality" (!) that we need to guard against, if we are to have any success in accurate evaluation, analysis and understanding of the real *status quo* about our sub-continent's Natural History. See, for example, Lavkumar Khacher's careful, pertinent, query on our so-called 'globally threatened' Darter or Snake Bird (NLBW 36: 95; 1996). See also Indraneil Das' extremely well drafted introductory text on "systematics, taxonomy and nomenclature" (JBNHS 100: 446-455; 2003). What is called environmental education is all right (needs to be imparted by salaried biology teachers in schools and colleges and not replicated but supplemented with more field training by experienced field biologists and naturalists, this usually done almost gratis !) but, just like most of our basic educational system, which is nowadays partly in the sorry hands of teachers and professors of questionable scholarship, there is great danger of misinformation and unproven, hyped, publicity on our Wildlife (and also our "Mildlife"—domesticated animals and cultivated plants), thus upsetting the applecart and warping priorities. Like this absolutely insane idea of linking all our major rivers, and so polluting (and defiling the individuality of) our sacred *Ganga*, *Yamuna*, *Godavari*, *Krishna* and *Kaveri*! J.C. Daniel's editorial in JBNHS 100(1) needs to be complimented by one and all and our political "leaders" educated to dump this environmentally suicidal plan.

If only single species like the tiger and sarus crane are highlighted (just like Sachin Tendulkar and Amitabh Bachchan are—hero worship at its basest) and not their highly threatened natural ecosystems which carry massive biodiversity (in balance), or their food-chains, there is something going wrong somewhere with our conservation-focus (is there one, really?) and psyche. Like M. Krishnan had written, in his last years of despair, if we Indians cannot be satisfied with using 95% of our land area for survival and "development" and are now encroaching upon the remaining 5% that God was believed to have created with his evolutionary wand in 6 days, what does the government and the public have as an answer? Indraneil Das (*op.cit.*, p. 455) also "emphasizes the importance of moving away from taxon-based conservation to protection of the environment at the level of landscapes and ecosystems..." and I believe conservationists and governments should re-focus accordingly. **The next 30 years are critical**, in my own and other "hyper active" field naturalists' opinion. Our grandchildren and their children will have only crows, cockroaches and cows to enjoy or study as "mildlife" and very little surviving wildlife! Agro-ecosystems and urbo-ecosystems, both artificially created by us humans and causing "ecosystem decay" are characteristically degenerate and poor in biodiversity. Convenient databases for 'city-trapped' and 'urban-locked' naturalists, like the recent book on the "Birds of Pune" [see Pitta 152: 3-5; 2003—author(s) not cited!] must be realized to be relatively unimportant as documentation of a depauperate, disturbed and degraded biodiversity. If this book is compared to something like the paper of Price *et al.* (JBNHS 100: 394-410; 2003) on "Bird species diversity along

the Himalaya," targeting relatively undisturbed and still pristine, though threatened, ecosystems, my point may possibly be understood and accepted? Incidentally, Price *et al.*'s map (p. 395) showing our breeding bird diversity in 250 sq. km grids may be compared to that in my Letter # 35 (*Pitta* 109-110: 2; 2000). We must protect our rapidly disappearing natural habitats by force (a Forest Protection Force, international, like I firmly believe, is sorely required), if necessary, and retain their tremendously rich genetic diversity that has evolved through millennia and carries the secrets of life, and is not the property of any person, community or country! Right now the forests of Arunachal Pradesh are being hacked by loggers and the once mighty Brahmaputra river is hardly a fraction of its usual awesome flow!

Vice-Admiral Awati's [*NLBW* 39(4): 67-68; 1999] extremely realistic analysis of the current state of our wilderness and wildlife (see also Zafar Futehally's editorial comments on p. 55) and his suggestion of creating a new **Indian Wildlife Service**, "recruited from young graduates in Natural Sciences who are genuinely committed to Wildlife conservation," and which should supplement our existing Indian Forest Service, could be a practical solution to our conservation and restoration woes. Production Forestry (by the IFS) restoring degraded reserve forests (especially those replanted with *Eucalyptus* species) and creating plantations of indigenous timber tree species in wasteland, should go hand-in-hand with Protection Forestry (by the new IWS) whose trained employees (including foreign specialist advisors) must then protect and augment our wild animals and plants, in collaboration with academicians, nature societies and biological institutions like the BNHS, WII or even our own BSAP and WWF Nature Clubs, etc. But, in effect, it is only the smitten naturalist, who characteristically works alone, who is the real "field expert" on select groups of our wildlife but, sadly, is little valued and consulted. There is plenty of our native biodiversity still unknown, little sampled, researched, identified, named, described, illustrated and documented. My own experience tells me that **30% or more of our zoological and botanical species are endemic to this sub-continent** and will go extinct in the next quarter century when their unique pristine habitats shrink further (less than 3-5% exist undisturbed today!) through our own governments' and citizens' greed and a callous, ignorant, consumerist lifestyle which dreams of "superpower status." This is hardly possible when our basic natural resources and life-support systems are vanishing or are being polluted through a commercial and so-called technological "addiction." This "drug," of a lavish, wasteful lifestyle and an urban, upper class mirage is what will threaten human peace and comraderie. Overpopulation and corruption, rampant in our sub-continent (besides a mindset of lend/borrow and spend), is a real danger fast approaching and at least India is rapidly proceeding to become another Bangladesh where the land is overcrowded with humans and domestic animals, its "carrying capacity" long exceeded, and where a once rich wildlife is almost non-existent now—even the Chittagong Hill Tracts are almost shorn of natural vegetation and wild animals. Is this the lightning ("India shining") before the deluge? Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!

Now that *Pitta* has begun a "new series" from this year, these "Letters" of mine also need a new focus. I will continue with ecological aspects of our birds (especially their food and nesting) and also introduce summaries of my own bird survey reports from several localities (with a biogeographical field approach, including my insect sampling) from the next Letter onwards. In passing, may I be permitted to say how very disappointed I am at the almost non-existent **feedback** from readers of these Letters of mine, penned almost every month for the past 7 years, starting October 1996. Who am I writing these for, I wonder? I would welcome focused correspondence from serious field ornithologists and bird watchers, who keep notes, so that I have at least a remote possibility of turning them into valuable members of the "mixed hunting parties" I will need for a revised third edition of the "FAUNA OF BRITISH INDIA, BIRDS," as my AVIFAUNA INDICA, which needs to be compiled, updated, analysed properly and presented in some detail. There are several illustrations now available of our bird diversity, but the text on them is grossly inadequate.

Dr Kumar Ghorpadé, c/o Doddagubbi P.O., Bangalore 562 149 & indiavifauna@yahoo.co.uk

(Submitted: 15 September 2003. Revised 23 March 2004)

[Editors' note: The opinions expressed by the author are his own and not those of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh.]

PIGEON POST

Concern for nesting Pariah Kites *Milvus migrans*

"This was the most horrible thing that ever happened in my life. The neighbours in front of my house cut down a coconut tree on which two kites were nesting. One of the kites was circling around the tree giving its peculiar call. The other too seemed to be calling for help. Soon three kites came there to help them protect their house. One by one they used to pass over the head of the woodcutter. In turn he would threaten them with his axe. This continued for two hours till the whole tree was cut down. At the end of the day the two kites were seen on a tall building. I was very sad that day. Next day I saw them making a new nest just in front of my house, once again. Other kites were around and I could not make out whether they helped them as well. Now I can see kites swooping down from the tree, right in front of my house."

—*Adhokshaj Katarni, Hyderabad*

Of Crows and Koels

"Thanks a lot for the very regular receipt of *Pitta*. I must congratulate the artist, Sachin, on his line drawings of birds. The Crested Grebes are depicted a trifle too fat even so, a fine job is being done."

"Perhaps Nitin might be delighted to learn that in Gandhinagar and I now find here in Rajkot, crows seem to have disappeared! Their absence has been noted by many. Koel numbers are, however, high and I suspect they have been over successful in foisting their eggs onto the crows. The moot question is, will we see a sudden drop in the Koel population? I have not heard many young Koels of late.

"I remember, listening with respectful amusement, the revered Salim Ali vituperate at the Rose-ringed Parakeets as a pest recollecting that the dear "old man" loved his mangoes and guavas which the parakeets were wastefully damaging. I am sure, were he to be with us now, he would have been delighted with the Rose-ringed Parakeets, the Alexandrine Parakeets and the Blossom-headed Parakeets (Eds' note: Plum-headed Parakeet) congregating on a friend's farm outside Ahmedabad where I have had nest boxes put up.

"The problem, as I see things, is that it is human beings of every persuasion who are the serious threat to all forms of wildlife."

--*Lavkumar Khacher, Rajkot*

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PROGRAMME

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 23-v-2004: Nehru Zoological Park, Hyderabad. Members are requested to assemble near the ticket counter by 6.30am. This will be a half-day trip. Carry snacks and water. For further information contact Siraj Taher (55612608) or Shafaat Ulla (23353098) before 11am or after 4pm.

INDOOR MEETING: 17-v-2004, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be intimated through the "engagements" columns of daily newspapers.

NOTES & NEWS

BIRDING IN VIJAYAWADA

Sarath Kumar

The area I would like to describe is located in the Housing Board Colony, Bhavanipuram [near HIG quarters] Vijayawada, which is about 4km from the railway station and 2km from the Prakasam barrage on the Hyderabad highway. It is a large area with extensive growth of aquatic grass and about 18" of water and mud in an area of approximately 20 acres.

A large number of birds of various species use this area for nesting. Besides these, other species come here to feed every morning. Black-headed Munias are one of the species that come in large numbers between 6.00-8.00am, between January and April.

Among the species seen are, Indian Moorhen, Purple Moorhen, White-breasted Waterhen, Bronze-winged Jacana, White-breasted Kingfisher, Pied Myna, Redvented Bulbul, Large Pied Wagtail, Redwattled Lapwing, Night Heron, Pond Heron, Little Cormorants, Blue-tailed Bee-eater, Chestnut Bittern, Purple Heron and Grey Heron along with a great number of Little and Cattle Egrets. Streaked Weavers nest here in large numbers.

This area is now threatened by construction activities. More than 70% of the grass was cut to make roads. Due to this, several species of birds moved to other places. Earlier there used to be some poaching activity, but people of the neighbouring colonies successfully curbed this.

Another nesting area is near Vidhyadharapuram Bus Depot, which is still untouched by human encroachment.

I would like some suggestions from the Society to protect these areas and to ensure that the breeding grounds of the birds remain protected

A Report on the Pragati Nagar Lakes

Sharada Annamaraju

My name is Sharada and I am a member of BSAP and have joined recently. I would like to share my birdwatching experiences at a nearby lake that has become a haven for birds. My father and I make regular visits to the lake and are truly amazed by the number of birds that come there. Birds that come here are mostly common but they come in large numbers. For the past six months Little Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax niger*) and Large Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) have made this lake their feeding ground and they come in numbers of 50 to 60. They are seen diving into the waters now and then returning with fish in their beaks. The cormorants sit happily on the rocks in the middle of the two lakes; (the lake was a big reservoir until a few years back when it was divided into two with the making of a bridge towards Pragati Nagar), basking in the sun until it is time to head back home, which is around 5:30 p.m in the evening. I got to see this beautiful sight once when all the cormorants slipped

into the water off the rocks and then flew off into the sky towards the setting sun in a huge wavy line formation. There were even Painted Storks (*Mycteria leucocephala*, 9- 10 in number) until a few weeks back near the rock formations by the lakes. Frequent visits to the lake brought about the sightings of Grey herons (*Ardea cinerea*), wire tailed swallows (*Hirundo smithii*), resident Small Blue Kingfishers (2), Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) Large Egret (*Casmerodius albus*) and Small Green Bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*).

On a recent trip to Narsapur forest reserve along with the BSAP, I got to see a female Marsh Harrier, a few Little Cormorants, a Pied Kingfisher, a River Tern, and there were supposed to be 2 Stilts somewhere in the grass growing in the horizon. There were two Asian Openbill Storks also. Upon our return my father decided to take an alternate route to our colony on the Miyapur road via Pragati Nagar and the two lakes. Surprise of surprises! what have we got here? There were 20-30 Blackwinged Stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*), River Terns (*Sterna aurantia* approx:20) and the cormorants covering every inch on the rocks. This was in 2:00 p.m in the afternoon.

On 26th November I went birdwatching along with my family to the lake and this time there was a family of Little Grebes (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) in the lake with three young ones and three adults in non-breeding plumage. I even saw one juvenile Blackwinged Stilt in the grasses. Wire-tailed Swallows were flying all around twisting and turning here and there over and under the bridge. Two Asian Openbill storks and four Marsh Harriers gave a brief performance near the lake. The Blackwinged Stilts started flying around in the skies and gave a beautiful air show. As usual the Green Bee-eaters were also there nearby on the wires and for the first time I saw a Streaked Fantail Warbler (*Cisticola juncidis*) flying to and fro into the scrubby bushes on the border of the lake. Other common birds were also there in the lake environs. My father saw a water snake also!

This is a wonderful place where one wouldn't even need a pair of binoculars as it looks like the birds are eager to display for their audience! Maybe individuals from the BSAP would like to visit this place before (probably), the birds stop coming here.

Yes, sadly, the danger of this event happening is also there. I would like to share my concern about this lake as, of late, encroachments around this lake have started developing at a rapid pace. The beautiful rock formations have been taken over for quarrying and many people are dumping their garbage on the shores of one of the lakes. It is a wonder how the birds are putting up with this disgrace. Evicted slum dwellers have built permanent houses near the lake and there is even a truck parking lot nearby. Just 6 months back this place was a pristine untouched parcel of land. Anyway, the birds are

the important part of this lake that I am sure many people would like to see and observe their behaviour as long as they are here. This lake can be reached from JNTU stop Kukatpally from where there is a straight road towards HMT hills colony from where there is a road going straight towards Pragati Nagar where the lakes are.

Saving the world's birds

THE STATE OF the World's Birds 2004 released by Birdlife International, a partner of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), presents fresh evidence that unsustainable development policies being followed by many nations have increased the risk of extinction for a large number of birds. One in eight bird species worldwide is threatened with extinction, making up a total of 1211 species or 12.4 per cent of all known birds. Of these, 179 species are in the red zone and could be lost forever in the immediate future. The status of birds assessed using the IUCN's Red List criteria is by far the most extensive study of any group of organisms over a 16-year period. The results indicate that biodiversity is at great risk today despite the more than 500 international treaties in operation to safeguard the environment. With 76 threatened bird species, India finds itself negatively ranked as the seventh in a global list. Nations with a worse conservation record are Indonesia, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, China and Ecuador where vital habitat is being cleared in the name of economic development. India has also to live down its reputation as a country that has not been able effectively to control smuggling of birds and animal parts. The scale of illegal activity was revealed by an IUCN affiliate, the Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce (TRAFFIC); its 1997 investigation showed a decline in the population of species such as the Alexandrine Parakeet owing to smuggling.

Calls for conservation are often dismissed as rigid arguments that retard economic development. Nothing could be further from the truth as research on macro issues such as climate change, soil fertility and water security has proved. Conventional economics does not account for the true value of natural systems, and by adopting a distorted model, encourages unsustainable development. The total annual value of nature's services to human economic activity is equivalent to an estimated \$ 33 trillion for just 17 ecosystems, the journal *Nature* has reported. *The State of the World's Birds 2004* recalls this statistic to make the point that the wealth generated with the help of the natural world is nearly of the same magnitude as the annual global Gross National Product. It has been revealed that the changes in global temperature resulting from unrestrained burning of fossil fuels has significantly

affected the distribution and lifecycle patterns of a host of species, including birds. Unless this trend is reversed, it is bound to affect agriculture and water security for all.

Water security is an issue of particular significance to India. Preserving the freshwater wetlands in the country is vital for the survival of not just birds, but entire communities. The Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), which is working on a draft plan to conserve the seven million hectares of wetlands by involving local communities in all the States, estimates that over 35 per cent of these assets has already been lost. Saving the remaining wetlands will provide not just safe havens for birds both endemic and migratory, but also sustenance for people who depend on the land. Not enough attention is being given to wetlands and marshes by State Governments, which often classify them as wasteland. Many of the less known water bodies in the country could be recommended by the Centre for protection under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. *Birdlife* has lamented the failure of most developing countries to use this instrument to protect their water bodies. SACON's formulation should become the blueprint for a national policy on wetlands. [19th March, 2004. ©Copyright, 2000-2003, *The Hindu*.]

Oldest hummingbird fossils found

A pair of 30 million-year-old fossils from southern Germany are the oldest fossil hummingbirds, a researcher says.

The location of the finds is unexpected, because today the birds are only known from the Americas.

In the latest edition of *Science* magazine, Dr Gerald Mayr claims the fossils show many striking resemblances to modern hummingbird groups.

The extinct hummingbirds may have influenced the shape of some modern Asian and African flowers.

"Maybe hummingbirds used to have a much wider distribution but - for some reason - they went extinct in the Old World," Gerald Mayr, Senckenberg Natural History Museum

"Fossils of primitive hummingbirds have been found in the Old World before, but it was a great surprise to find a bird that looked so similar to the modern hummingbirds of the Old World," Dr Mayr of the Senckenberg Natural History Museum in Frankfurt told BBC News Online.

Other fossil hummingbirds have been found in Central America, Europe and Asia, but they are either very different from modern ones or are known from just a few bones.

The new fossils, which have been assigned to the species *Eurotrochilus inexpectatus*, were endowed with

long, nectar-sucking beaks and wings designed for feeding while hovering.

They share key anatomical features on their wings with modern hummingbirds. The primitive hummingbird *Jungornis tesselatus* lacks these features.

Mystery extinction

This suggests that *Eurotrochilus* and modern hummingbirds belong together in a distinct group of birds, while *Jungornis* belongs to another, more primitive group.

"Maybe hummingbirds used to have a much wider distribution but - for some reason - they went extinct in the Old World," said Dr Mayr.

Dr Mayr said he had no idea what caused this extinction. ↗

Professor Ethan Temeles of Amherst College in Massachusetts, US, speculated that the extinction could have been caused by climate change.

"Certainly if you consider the small size of hummingbirds, if there were climatic changes, that may have been the factor responsible," he told BBC News Online.

"If you look at temperate, migratory hummingbirds that are coming up to, for example, Canada - if you end up having a snowstorm early in the year or late in the year it can kill the population."

But Professor Temeles said that competition between hummingbirds and other nectar-feeding birds might also have been a factor.

Extinct hummingbirds might also have helped determine the shape of some modern Asian and African flowers through a back-and-forth evolutionary process called coevolution.

These plants could include the species *Canarina eminii*, *Impatiens sakeriana* and *Agapetes*.

"If you take one of the North American species of *Impatiens*, it has a very long floral tube that's shaped like a trumpet, ending in a nectar tube or spur.

"The nectar-containing spur associates with the hummingbird beak to some extent - though not perfectly. At the same time, they contain petals around the flower which suggests they provide a landing platform for bees."

Dr Mayr added: "Botanists now have to look at plants in the Old World to see if any of them show evidence of co-evolving with hummingbirds." [Story from BBC NEWS: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/sci/tech/3691169.stm>. Published: 2004/05/06 © BBC MMIV.]

An Ohio toy company is drawn into the hunt for an elusive bird

A Twinsburg-based (Ohio) toy company is helping to locate a rare bird in India. The bird, a Jerdon's

Courser, inhabits scrub forests in the rocky, rolling foothills of southern India.

Little is known about this elusive, nocturnal bird, whose scientific name is *Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*. Looking at a photo of the bird, Harvey Webster, director of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History's Wildlife Resources Center, thought it looked somewhat like a giant plover. The bird's diet is termites primarily, a fact that was discovered through analysis of its droppings.

The Jerdon's Courser was believed to be extinct... (till discovered in 1986 by Bharat Bhushan). Pancheppakesan Jeganathan, a Bombay Natural History Society researcher, and Simon Wotton, a scientist from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds at Cambridge University, identified the bird. They are the only people ever able to photograph it and record its call.

And it is the call - two identical raucous notes, with a soft, slurred sound in the middle - that drew in the toy company. Rhys Green, a scientist with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, was browsing in the Royal Botanic Gardens gift shop. He saw several realistic-looking plush toy birds manufactured by K&M International of Twinsburg.

When squeezed, each toy emits the authentic call of its species, thanks to microchip technology, the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in the United States and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Europe, which provided the original recordings. Green was thinking about the Jerdon's Courser, and he had an idea. He contacted K&M and asked the company to reproduce the Jerdon's Courser's call on a sound box.

The recordings would be given to rangers, conservationists and ornithologists in the field in southern India to help them recognize the call and perhaps lure the nocturnal bird out of hiding. "We felt it was an honor that we were asked to do this," said Manjit Dhillon, marketing director of K&M.

A company team spent about four months removing distortion from the original recording and transferring it to microchips, which were inserted into sound boxes. K&M shipped 1,000 sound boxes to the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds in January, and from there they were forwarded to India. A number of researchers, including the Bombay Natural History Society, are interested in identifying the Jerdon's Courser's seasonal habits, the current population and distribution.

[SOURCE: Cleveland Plain Dealer. From: Natural History of South Asia - General discussion and research (nathistory-india@Princeton.EDU) on behalf of Landour Marten (landourmarten@HOTMAIL.COM)]

Mystery Bird Discovered On Indonesian Island

Scientists exploring an island in Indonesia have found a bird they believe is new to science.

The bird's DNA is soon to be analyzed to determine whether it's a new species or a radically altered subspecies, descended from castaways blown from another island. To complicate things further, the bird could also be an as-yet-unidentified pet trade escapee.

This, however, is highly unlikely, according to Nicola Marples, zoology lecturer at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland. "It's almost certainly a new species, or the first ever subspecies of the pale-bellied white eye," she said. "While it could also be a feral escape population from elsewhere, we don't think this is the case as we've found no other bird that matches its description."

Marples, as part of a team led by fellow zoologists David Kelly, from Trinity College, and Martin Meads, a freelance researcher, discovered the bird last summer on Wangi Wangi island in southeast Sulawesi. Meads says the bird, known provisionally as the Wangi Wangi white eye, is found only in one area, near the village of Wanci. He added, "Our surveys, which were conducted over a seven-day period, never recorded the species in any other part of the island."

Sulawesi is of great scientific interest as it forms part of a zoogeographical zone known as Wallacea. The region marks the boundary between Oriental fauna and distinctive Australasian animals such as marsupials. The new find is thought to belong to a group of small, mainly insectivorous birds called white eyes, which are related to warblers. As well as the characteristic white ring around the eye, they usually have green plumage with white, yellow or greyish underparts.

The mystery bird was first spotted in scrubland along with lemon-bellied white eyes (*Zosterops chloris*). Marples says the species it most closely resembles is the pale-bellied white eye (*Zosterops consobrinorum*), though there are some striking differences.

Big Beak

"The Wangi Wangi white eye is almost half as big again," Marples explained. "The beak is big and yellow rather than small and black, while it has grey on the breast instead of being entirely white. It also has very pale feet which is most unusual." The study team suspect the bird evolved into a separate island race having been blown astray and marooned on Wangi Wangi, part of the Tukangbesi archipelago. The nearest known pale-bellied white eye population is on Buton island, over 20 miles (32 kilometers) away.

Marples added, "As the Tukangbesi islands are oceanic [rose from the sea], all bird species present today must have invaded from elsewhere. The white eyes are a famously intrepid family of birds and have colonized numerous islands in the past. It appears that in this case two closely related species [the pale-bellied and yellow-bellied white eye] have colonized and subsequently diverged from their mainland forms. One

of these has become larger and the other smaller, and it is likely that is due to their interactions."

This evolutionary process would allow them both to co-exist on the island by exploiting slightly different food resources.

The team observed a similar trend during previous trips to the islands of Buton and Kabaena where, in 1999, they discovered a new subspecies of red backed thrush (*Zoothera erythronota kabaena*). However, Marples describes the Wangi Wangi white eye as "massively different" from other white eyes, increasing hopes of it being an entirely new species.

White eyes elsewhere have shown this same ability to reinvent themselves. Scientists suggest they are speciating (becoming genetically distinct) on various islands off northern Australia. The process appears to echo the famous example of "Darwin's finches" in the Galapagos Islands. Fourteen different finches evolved from a common ancestor, each adapted to suit the conditions of their various islands. They helped Charles Darwin, who visited the Galapagos in the 1830s, towards his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Alfred Wallace

Wallacea is named after Darwin's contemporary and fellow evolutionist, Alfred Wallace, who first identified the region as the zoogeographical boundary between Oriental and Australasian animals. Covering much of eastern Indonesia, Wallacea is remarkable for its high degree of localized endemism and has at least 250 endemic bird species. Scientists believe there are more out there waiting to be discovered. "The vast number of islands in this region, many of which are remote and inaccessible, means that much basic biological survey and inventory work is still required, together with investigations of threatened birds," states BirdLife International, a UK-based nonprofit bird conservation group. Expeditions such as the one to Wangi Wangi are doing just that. They form part of Operation Wallacea, an international conservation and scientific research program centered on southeast Sulawesi. Scientists say the Sulawesi region holds a higher concentration of endemic birds than any other place on Earth. Yet many of them are at risk from human pressures.

Marples says the chief threat comes from logging, adding, "The sad thing is that Wangi Wangi is the most trashed of all the islands we've been to, and as far as we could see is the only home of this new bird." It was also a regional center for the pet trade—many endangered wild birds used to be sold to be kept in cages. By highlighting the wealth of unique wildlife living on islands like Wangi Wangi, Operation Wallacea is helping to convince the Indonesian authorities that the remaining forests should be protected. Marples added, "We hope to persuade them there's money to be made

from ecotourism by selling the potential of watching birds in the area." In that case, the Wangi Wangi white eye should be one more for the birders' checklist.

[From: "Colin Trainor" <halmahera@hotmail.com> To: <orientalbirding@yahoo-groups.com>]

Volunteer for bird conservation project

Robin Vijayan

We are looking for a volunteer for our project "Conservation Biology of the White-bellied Shortwing" being conducted in the Shola forests of Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Annamalais, Tamilnadu. Our project would last for another two years, though volunteers can stick with the project for as long as they wish (minimum preferred duration would be 3 months). We are looking for someone with a lot of patience and interest in fieldwork and willing to work very hard (typical sampling is from 0600 to 1800hrs). Exposure to various techniques can be gained in bird population monitoring (point-counts, spot-mapping and (perhaps) mark-recapture by mist-netting birds), behaviour studies (foraging and breeding), insect abundance quantification, habitat characterisation (vegetation plots) and vocalisation studies. Four-wheeler driving license holders will be preferred. Monetary compensation can be discussed (though our project is more or less starved of funds most of the time!) but good food and basic accommodation facilities will be gladly provided. Interested candidates can also develop a small project on the side, as a part of this project or independently.

Most importantly we would like to work with a person who understands what we are doing and why we are doing what we are doing. We plan to start our next round of sampling from 2nd week of May.

We will be glad to clear any questions you might have (contact: robinvijayan@yahoo.com).

Books received

The BSAP reading room received the following books during April 2004.

Books

1. Khushwant Singh & Sudhasattwa Basu. 1997. *Nature Watch*. Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd. [Donated by T. Vijayendra]
2. Thomas Gay, Isaac David Kehimkar & Jagdish Chandra Punetha. 1992. *Common Butterflies of India*. Bombay: WWF-India & O.U.P. [Donated by T. Vijayendra]
3. R.C. Sharma & T.S.N. Murthy (Compilers) 1991. *Snakes and Human Welfare*. Calcutta: Zoological Survey of India. [Donated by T. Vijayendra]

4. S.P. Shahi. 1977. *Backs to the Wall*. Madras: Affiliated East-West Press Pvt. Ltd. [Donated by T. Vijayendra]

6. *Mistnet*. Vol. 4. Nos. 3&4. July-December 2003.

7. *Conservation Biology*. Vol. 18. No. 1. February 2004.

8. *Danphe*. Vol. 12. Nos. 1/2. March/June 2003. [Exchange copy]

Journals / Periodicals

1. *Down to Earth*. Vol. 12. Nos. 17-22. 31 January-15 April 2004. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie]

2. *Down to Earth. Supplement (Industrial water use.)* No. 4. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie]

3. *Down to Earth. Supplement (Dieselisation.)* No. 5. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie]

4. *Gobar Times*. Nos. 39-41. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie]

5. *Birds*. Vol. 20. No. 1. Spring 2004 & No. 2. Summer 2004. [Exchange copy]

9. *Suara Enggang*. No. 1. January-February 2004. [Exchange copy]

10. *Birdwatcher's Digest*. Vol. 26. No. 4, & No. 5. March/April & May/June 2004. [Donated by Aasheesh Pittie]

11. *Conservation & Society*. Vol. 1. No. 2. July-December 2003.

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PROGRAMME - November and December

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 19-xii-2004: Rouriyal Tank, Rangareddi District: Route Charminar - Barkas - Pahadi Shareef. After 12 - 13 km., take the first left turn after Pahadi Shareef and drive on for 5 km. to the tank, which is on the right hand side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 - 7.30 a.m. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Crested Honey Buzzards that are always to be seen in the area, and used to nest in a large tree near the tank. There are sure to be lots of ducks, especially Pintails and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 20-xii-2004, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad.

NOTES & NEWS

BUTTERFLIES, THE FLYING JEWELS

(A report on the indoor meeting held on 16th August 2004)

by

S. Ashok Kumar

(with inputs from Kiran Katikaneni)

!! Is the Elephant dung good to eat?" thus the talk and demonstration of 'Moths and Butterflies' by Dr. S. Tej Kumar started. This drew varied and funny answers from the audience and finally Dr. Kumar himself went on to say that, 'Well, it must be so. Because 26 species of Insects cannot be wrong in their preference for elephant dung for food, shelter etc.

Dr. Kumar is an Entomologist and the founder-secretary of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh. He introduced the audience to the wonderful world of Insects by talking about their distribution worldwide and in India.

The meeting was well attended and the questions posed showed the keenness of the participants in knowing more about butterflies and moths.

At the outset Dr. Tej Kumar, Entomologist pointed out that 75% of the life-forms on earth are insects and that there are 20,000 species of butterflies in the world out of which 1500 are found in India. Of these 306 species are found in South India including about 125 species found in Hyderabad region. Outlining the morphology of butterflies and moths belonging to the same group

called Lepidoptera meaning scaled wings, he stated that moths are nocturnal while the butterflies are diurnal, while few others are crepuscular. Generally the lifespan of these insects is about ten days but the butterflies belonging to Papilionidae family like the Birdwing are known to live forever six months and certain butterfly species are noted to live upto one year. Moths lay eggs as an eggmass on the underside of leaves while the butterflies lay eggs on the upper side, either spindle shaped or spherical, singly. Caterpillars are the larvae of these insects. He mentioned that in lifecycle of insects there is partial and complete metamorphosis. Abundance, prolific output, short lifespan, small size and mimicry are the survival and defense strategies adopted by them. Compared to butterflies which are effective pollinators, moths are more harmful as they attack and destroy food crops, fruit gardens etc. Red hairy caterpillar, skippers, pyralids and stem borers are a menace to the crops. The citrus butterfly attacks the citrus plants. Only a few moth species are beneficial to us.

The Sphinx or death-head moth is the most attractive of all the moths. Butterfly chrysalids are shiny, attractive, naked and devoid of cocoon whereas caterpillars of moths weave a cocoon for their pupation mostly pupating in soil or leaf litter or in stems. Tussar moth produces tussar silk and the mulberry moth produces the mulberry silk. Dr. Tej Kumar mentioned that one mulberry silk pupa can produce about a kilometre of length of silk.

Referring to migratory butterflies he pointed out that the Painted Lady and dark clouded yellow butterfly immigrants are very rare to Hyderabad region, common being Emigrant species. Out of

125 species of butterflies found in Hyderabad region more than 50% are of rare occurrence.

Dwelling on butterfly diversity in the Hyderabad area, he detailed the species of butterflies representing nine families namely Acraeidae (Coasters), Danaidae (Crows & Tigers), Hesperiidae (Skippers & Darts), Lycaenidae (Blues, Coppers & Metal marks), Nemeobiidae (Judies & Punches), Nymphalidae (Admirals, Emperors, Rajas & Venessas), Papilionidae (Swallowtails, Birwings & Apollos), Pierridae (Sulphurs, Whites, Orange and Crimson tips & Jezebels) and Satyridae (Browns, Satyrs & Wood nymphs). Few families are represented by one species only.

Emphasizing that habitat destruction, scarcity of water sources, lack of concern for these creatures have affected them. He finally stated that in the absence of detailed surveys on their occurrence and populations, there is awful lack of diversity inventories in Andhra Pradesh. Urgent steps are necessary for taking conservation measures and creating awareness about their ecological and economic significance which form part of food chain of birds. They are indeed a part of our faunal diversity and national heritage.

Urban Birding
by
The City Bird-Brain

Were I to be asked to select a bird that epitomises this part of the world, I would, unhesitatingly, pick the Common Myna. There is something dashing about this bold brigand. He swaggers about as though any place he may see fit to grace with his presence, for the duration of his stay there, belongs to him. Nor is his appearance hard on the eyes – distinctly pleasing, in fact. Colourful without being too flamboyant; tasteful without being too garish. Moreover I have been informed, though I cannot vouch for it, that he is an industrious worker and a friend of the farmer as well. All these are noble properties and deserve a closer look at the owner of said properties. So this month, we focus on the Common Myna – a cosmopolitan bird but certainly at home both in the city and out of it. You will find these birds on the rooftops of houses in Charminar (one of the busiest places I know of), and at the other end, do not be surprised to encounter this species in the middle of Anantagiri Hills reserved forest area.

We find this chap also in places as diversified as the British Isles and I remember seeing a few in Nairobi (Kenya) as well. I am also told that they are residing quite happily in some other areas of Europe as well, and certainly they are present in Southern Africa also. These are imported specimens; (*Firangeez* as we call their equivalents here). The *Angrez* were not immune to the charms of this bird and they took a few specimens back home with them. These were the raw stock from which came the subsequent suburban, and later the feral population of these birds, in climes hitherto unknown to the species, but which, with their typical audacity, they immediately set about adapting to and thriving in. They possess the knack of adapting to the

environment without demanding that the environment adapt to them; though they ensure the latter in course of time.

I have a few residing in the mango tree across the street from the flat. They are usually the first to wake up in the morning. And once they are up, everyone else has to follow – they see to that. Never was a more talkative bird (and that includes the Babblers!) – the beak never closes from morning to night. And they generally seem to be having an interesting and meaningful conversation. I defy anyone to disprove the fact that their conversation is meaningful, interesting and entertaining. All that is lacking is the words that we can understand – and if we cannot understand their language – that is no fault of the Myna. Having said that, we are told that they are quite capable of mimicking the human language too. My old man tells of a pet Myna they had in the days of long ago, (and I mean long ago – when the old man was considerably younger than I am now!), that was capable of saying quite intelligent sentences. I regret that I seem to have forgotten the sentences the bird specialised in – but they were intelligent sentences; of that I am quite certain.

A good many Mynas are seen in the cages of the bird market in the Mehboob Chowk area in Hyderabad. Most of them have a few feathers missing, the result of getting caught in bird-lime traps. There seems to be a ready market for these birds – which is not to be wondered at, given their attractions and their ability to mimic the human voice. At the same time be it said that I personally consider it a shame that so attractive a bird should be shut up in a cage and made to repeat words that have little or no meaning. Having said that, I remember that our pet parrot learnt to accurately mimic the Mynas in the tree opposite the balcony. These Mynas used to stand on the branch and shout (rude??) words at the parrot, and that bird picked up the words and many interesting duets were played between the protagonists from time to time. I think I started to develop my sick headaches from that point onwards.

I recollect a time when I was standing waiting for a train at the Srikakulam Road railway station. The platform was shaded by two giant tamarind trees which were quite obviously a roost for the entire Myna population of the area (if not the entire district). Never have I seen so many Mynas together gathered – and all talking at the tops of their not inconsiderable voices. Strangely though, this chatter does not give one the headache that human chatter on a far lesser scale is capable of. But setting aside this headache matter – I exaggerate not when I say that there were at least a thousand Mynas gathered on those two trees. They kept up a continuous activity for over an hour. Small parties would sally forth periodically and return and, on one occasion, when a flock of crows appeared, a flock of about 50 strong took off and harried those unfortunates for a good 2 minutes until the crows had crossed some invisible boundary, at a good distance from their roost. For those who are interested, my train was three hours late that day!

For their size, these birds are extraordinarily bold. I have seen a pair of Common Mynas seeing off a flock of crows, which seemed to have evil designs on the nest that the birds had constructed in a hibiscus hedge. A Shikra was also the target of incessant chivvying by the birds when it blundered past the

territory demarcation line. Other visitors were treated more chivalrously – but the appearance of a cat in the neighbourhood set the birds off again and I have never in my life seen a cat run faster. These things argue a stout heart and a corresponding boldness of disposition – and these are a few of the other things that further endear the Common Myna to me. A pair visits me regularly – obviously gourmets, they appreciate the few bits of fruit they find in the bird food buffet; but it is also all too obvious that they appreciate the company on the balcony. A flock of chattering Sparrows, a few odd pigeons and sometimes a crow to chase – what more could the Mynas ask for. Plus they appear to have a soft spot for me as well – one of them obviously regards me as a perch (if a slightly uncomfortable one), while the other is equally fascinated by my shoelaces! This particular chap is convinced that these shoelaces are edible – and nothing I do or

say can make him believe otherwise. These things look like earthworms, so they must be edible – is his mentality.

And that is one of the only things I can find to cavil at in the species. So bright and intelligent a bird cannot be pardoned for such a basic mistake. But never mind, no doubt there are eccentrics even in the Myna world – just like everywhere else. So concentrate this month on the Common Myna, even the eccentric one – he repays inspection. And if you find him an interesting study – you'll join the ranks of the Myna fanciers. If there is no such body around, it's high time there was! I would happily take life membership for such an organization. Till next time – Happy Birding!!

LETTER FROM AN INSECT-HUNTING ORNITHOLOGIST - 65.

Proemial account of bird surveys made on and around the Eastern Ghats near Cuddapah : Part II

“THE PENINSULAR AREA. The basal complex of the ancient block of the Peninsula consists of highly metamorphosed rocks, like gneisses and schists of the Archaean System. By far the larger part of the Peninsula, but particularly the central and southern portions, is occupied by this ancient, crystalline complex . . .”

“A group of highly folded and altered sediments of slates and schists is known as the Cuddapah Series, which were folded into the already complex Archaean and Dharwar Series during the Pre-Cambrian times. . . Nevertheless, the Peninsula has been a stable landmass since very ancient times, at least the Pre-Cambrian.

At a later period, the Peninsula was part of the Gondwana Continent, in the hollows of which series of fresh-water deposits of sandstones and shales were laid down. From that remote period down to the present times, the Deccan area has remained a continental mass. . .”

“. . . The Cuddapah rocks are preserved mainly east of Deccan, between the R. Krishna and the R. Pennar [sic!] and also in the valley of the upper Mahanadi river. Except perhaps in the long border ridges of the Nallamalai [sic!] and Velikonda Hills, these are very little disturbed. . .”

“The Vindhyan rocks overlie the Cuddapah rocks in the lowest part of the R. Krishna-Pennar trough. . .”

“The socalled Eastern Ghats are much less strongly marked than the Western Ghats and seem to disappear for a distance of about 160 km, in between the rivers Godavari and Krishna. In the north there are some dissected massifs of the older Peninsular rocks. Relics of ancient mountains like the Nallamalai, Velikonda, Palkonda in the middle and south of the R. Krishna, the gneiss bosses of the Shevroy [sic!] and Pachamalai Hills in the south belong to the Eastern Ghats. The expression Eastern Hills is to be preferred to the Eastern Ghats for the north; Cuddapah Ranges for the middle and Tamilnad Hills for the southern portion.”

“CUDDAPAH BASIN. Proterozoic rocks are exposed in a crescent-shaped basin, extending parallel to the eastern coast, from south of the R. Godavari to near Madras City. It contains two distinct groups . . . The older, called the Cuddapah system, comprises four series namely the Papaghni, Cheyair, Nallamalai and Kistna. The Cuddapah rocks overlie the gneisses with a marked unconformity, the lowest beds being conglomerates and quartzites. There are contemporaneous basic lavas and pyroclastics in the lowest division. These have given ages around 1350 million years, which may be taken as more or less the beginning of the Cuddapah period. The sedimentary rocks are mainly quartzites and shales with subordinate dolomitic limestone. Dolomite dykes of probable Kistna age are also found traversing the Cuddapah rocks. As they do not penetrate the younger rocks of the Kurnool System, they are believed to have intruded towards the close of the Cuddapah period. The Cuddapah rocks of Nallamalai age are penetrated by a diamond-bearing kimberlite pipe at Chelima in Kurnool district. . . The Cuddapah System may, therefore, be taken as spanning the interval between 1400 and 980 million years.

The rocks of the Kurnool System were deposited in the western and northwestern portions of the Cuddapah Basin, after the Cuddapahs were raised up and were subjected to some folding. They are mainly shales and limestones. They are also divided into the four series, the Banganapalli, Jammalamadugu, Paniam and Kundair, from below upwards. Their age seems to be between 900 and 550 million years or thereabouts.”

“. . . The Cuddapah Basin must originally have extended for a considerable distance to the east of its present eastern margin, but the rocks in the eastern portion have been eroded away. There are some indications that the Cuddapah sediments were subjected to mild metamorphism at about 450 to 500 million years ago; this age is indicated by mica in the phyllitic rocks of the Cuddapahs and in the charnockites of the Kondapalli Hills near Vijayawada.” [M.S. Krishnan, 1974, “Geology,” pp. 61-62, 64, 67, 81-82, in M.S. Mani [ed.] *Ecology and Biogeography in India*. W. Junk, The Hague, Holland.]

“Unlike the Western Ghats, the Eastern Ghats are not by any means a range of mountains or escarpment, but represent the much broken and weathered relicts of the Peninsular Plateau, marked by a series of isolated ‘hills’. The Eastern Ghats mark the eastern borders of the Peninsular Plateau and thus extend from the extreme northeast to the south of the Chota-Nagpur Plateau, to the extreme southeast corner of the Peninsula. The eastern edge of the Nilgiri, Anamalai, and Palni Hills are also parts of the Eastern Ghats. The geology and general climatic conditions of this region have been outlined in foregoing chapters. . .”

“The two major phytogeographical divisions of the Eastern Ghats, generally recognized by botanists, are based on a restricted concept of the Ghats, viz. 1. The northern *sal* division and 2. The southern Deccan division. We consider here the extreme southern parts of the Peninsula, especially the eastern edge of the Palni and Nilgiri Hills, the trends of which coincide with those of the other sections, as the third phytogeographical division.

“South of the wide Godavari-Krishna Gap, where the Eastern Ghats are interrupted, lies the middle phytogeographical section of the Deccan division of the Eastern Ghats. The Godavari Gap is occupied in the northeast by the R. Godavari and in the southwest by the R. Krishna. The Ghats are continued south of the R. Krishna by the Nallamalai Hills, extending from Guntur through Kurnool, Cuddapah and North Arcot to Salem Districts.”

“The dominant grasses include *Andropogon pumilus*, *Apluda mutica*, *Chloris barbata*, *Dactyloctenium aegyptium*, *Eragrostis tremula*, *Heteropogon contortus* and *Setaria pallidefusca*. Further southwest in the Kurnool area, the Nallamalai Hills are characterized by dominance of *Anogeissus latifolia*, *Hardwickia binata*, *Terminalia tomentosa* and *Tectona grandis*. The other deciduous trees are *Garuga pinnata*, *Givotia rotundiformis* and *Miliusa velutina*. We thus observe that the vegetation of the Nallamalai Hills varies from evergreen patches to dry deciduous and moist deciduous at higher levels. Scrub vegetation is also present and is characterized by *Atalanta monophylla*, *Dichrostachys cinerea*, *Zizyphus rugosa*, *Zizyphus oenoplia* and *Plectranthus parviflora*. The typical moist deciduous species include *Clerodendron serratum*, *Costus speciosus*, *Glochidion leucoxylon*, *Tacca leontopetaloides*, *Thunbergia laevis*, *Entada purpurea* and *Bauhinia vahlii*.

The Cuddapah area of the Nallamalai Hills is remarkable for its mixed deciduous vegetation, with an abundance of *Hardwickia binata*, *Anogeissus latifolia* and *Pterocarpus santalinus* above the scrub jungle. The dominant climbers in Nallamalai area are *Acacia caesia*, *Acacia pennata*, *Jacquemontia paniculata*, *Merrimia*

hederacea, *Pterolobium hexapetalum*, *Rivea hypocrateiformis* and *Ventilago calycinus*. *Pterocarpus santalinus* occurs at elevations of 250-600 m, above which we come across *Shorea thumbaggaia* and *Syzygium alternifolium*."

"The Velikonda Hills are characterized by *Chloroxylon swietenia*, *Terminalia tomentosa* and *Xylia xylocarpa*." [M.S. Mani, 1974, "The Vegetation and Phytogeography of the Eastern Ghats," pp. 197, 200-201, in M.S. Mani [ed.] Ecology and Biogeography in India. W. Junk, The Hague, Holland.]

"The middle section of the E. Ghats extends from the Krishna to near about Madras and includes the Nallamalai, Palkonda, Velikonda hills whose average elevation is 750 m. Quartzite and slate formations predominate..."

"By far the most extensive vegetation type is the *Tectona grandia-Anogeissus latifolia-Terminalia tomentosa* (dry deciduous teak forest) type. It occurs on almost all the ranges of the Peninsula with the exception of the eastern parts of Satpura, Chota Nagpur plateau, the north section of the Eastern Ghats and the northern Aravallis. The altitudinal range is 700 to 1200 m according to the latitude."

"A variant of the dry deciduous teak forest is the *Hardwickia binata* type in which either teak is totally absent or is dominated by *Hardwickia*. This type occurs in the Vindhya, Satpuras, middle and southern sections of the Eastern Ghats as in the Nallamalais, Kalrayen, and the Mysore plateau. In the Andhra Pradesh part of the Eastern Ghats, the Red Sanders, *Pterocarpus santalinus*, is an important associate (both physiognomically and economically) of *Hardwickia*. Annual rainfall is about 1000 mm spread over 5-6 months..." [P. Legris & V.M. Meher-Homji, 1977, "Phytogeographic outlines of the hill ranges of Peninsular India." Tropical Ecology, 18: 11, 15.]

A former Director of the Botanical Survey of India (Howrah, Calcutta), Dr M.P. Nayar, had presented an extremely informative and eye-opening lecture in December 1993 at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, Taramani, Madras, titled " 'Hot Spots' of Plant diversity in India." His text was reproduced in Blackbuck [10(2): 42-46; 1994], the Journal of the Madras Naturalists' Society and is critical reading and reference work for the serious naturalist, forester and conservationist. Dr Nayar mentioned that our Indian plant diversity has a floristic bank of 45,000 species, with millions of genes, ranging from Cyanobacteria (blue-green algae) to the Angiosperms (flowering plants). He also stated that "50% of the endangered species would disappear by the turn of the century" and I wonder how much of this scary prediction has come true since I myself have noticed several expanses of natural jungle and other vegetation destroyed in the last decade and a half. Nayar had also indicated 26 "Centres of Endemism in India" in 1989, of which the "Tirupati—Cuddapah Hills" were one. How much is now known of the biodiversity of these highlands, especially of the "lower groups" like insects and other invertebrates, is a moot question.

As a comparison, the grid square (275km each way, vertical or horizontal) encompassing the Cuddapah area has been known to possess some 187 breeding bird (non-aquatic, non-marine) and 15 tiger-beetle (Coleoptera: Cicindelidae) species (see my Letter # 35). Compare this with the numbers for the most species-rich Indian grid which has 537 bird species and 58 cicindelid species recorded from the easternmost Nepal, Darjeeling—Sikkim and west Bhutan area on the one hand and the two richest peninsular Indian grids covering the Coorg, Wynad, Biligiris, Nilgiris, Anaimalais, Palnis and Cardamom Hills areas, each of which have from 230-240+ breeding land bird and 40-50 tiger-beetle species so far recorded. The definitive paper on "Status of Wildlife and habitat conservation in Andhra Pradesh" by late K.S.R. Krishna Raju and others (1988, J. Bombay nat. Hist. Soc., 84: 605-619) lists over two dozen commoner mammals, from the tiger to the tree shrew, found here. The Cuddapah District Gazetteer mentions the mongoose and giant squirrel also and states that though "The District is not very much rich in game... In the 17th century the forests of the district were rich enough even to support wild elephants" (vide writings of the travelling French jeweller, Jean-Baptiste Traveneir). Since the establishment of British rule here around 1800, with Munro as the Collector and Major-General D. Campbell as Commander of the ceded districts, the opening up of inaccessible tracts by railway and road networks until the present day, the damming of rivers, conversion of native habitat into cultivated land, and, primarily, the rapid increase in human and domestic herbivore populations have all taken heavy toll of native wildlife and wildernesses here. Cuddapah (and Chittoor) District may have held the last remaining population of the Indian Cheetah (*Acinonyx venaticus*), a probable last sighting of which was near Mamandur in the 1950s in what is now the Venkateshwara National Park.

A more complete account of Cuddapah District history, geography, agriculture, climate, geology, flora and fauna will be given by Riyazuddin and myself in our preliminary paper on Cuddapah Ornithology now in preparation, but I may inform the reader here of a few of the more basic databases of the natural history of this district. It lies in the heart of the Rayalseema socio-cultural region in southern Andhra Pradesh and is surrounded by the present districts of Anantapur, Kurnool, Prakasam, Nellore and Chittoor. Its area is about 15,360 sq. km, with a human population in excess of 25 lakh, and is administratively divided into 9 talukas, straddling 13°45'—15°10' N and 77°55'—79°30' E in latitude and longitude. There are 6 dry months from December to May, with the latter being hottest and the other 6 months (June to November) are rainy with maximum precipitation in September and October, the average annual rainfall being 768mm. Bharat Bhushan's map (JBNHS 83: 3; 1986) of the Cuddapah area, based on the Forest Atlas, is a fairly reasonable guide, but better topo sheets by the Survey of India are now available. Cuddapah is the most hilly district of Andhra Pradesh south of the Godavari river. Here lie the following more important forested hill ranges with orientation relative to Cuddapah town, situated near the River Penner which drains into the Bay of Bengal to the east, near the town of Nellore where the pioneer British Indian ornithologist, Thomas Caverhill Jerdon, was resident during the middle and late 19th century. The Nallamala range (highest point in Cuddapah District is 917m or 3005ft) just enters Cuddapah District in the north and is separated from the Lankamala Hills (= "hilly island" in native tongue, highest peak 821m or 2693ft) just NNE of Cuddapah across the Penner. The similarly north-south oriented Velikonda range (893m or 2930ft highest peak in this district) is separated from the Nallamala by the Sagileru River and also forms the border between Cuddapah and Nellore Districts. Its section south of the Penner extends down to the famous Tirupati temple area and may be termed the Tirumala Hills here (or the Southern Velikonda; 1105m or 3636ft highest peak). Then, WSW of Cuddapah is the east-west oriented Seshachalam range (696m or 2281ft highest point) which lies between the Chitravati and Papagni Rivers. The Palkonda range (1028m or 3366ft highest) lies south of Cuddapah and extends SSE across the Cheyyeru River down to near the Tirumala (S. Velikonda) Hills near Tirupati, separated from these by the Southern Railway line which runs in the valley between these two hill ranges. Bhushan's map (vide supra) labels these Palkondas as "Seshachalam" and this anomaly needs to be explained here. Whether the Seshachalam—Palkonda range is to be recognized as a joint geological entity or to be treated as two distinct ranges, separated by the Papagni (or Cheyyeru ?) rivers needs to be clarified. I however prefer my interpretation as set out above.

The quotations from Krishnan, Mani, Legris and Meher-Homji, reproduced above, deal synoptically with the geology and phytogeography of this area, but some further notes may be helpful to the serious reader. Gadgil & Meher-Homji's map of biogeographic regions and vegetation types (1982) indicates that the dominant forest type prevalent in Cuddapah District is of the Hardwickia Zone, with *Hardwickia binata*, *Albizia amara*, *Anogeissus latifolia* and *Pterocarpus santalinus* as the important tree species here. On the higher hills, the Teak Zone is evident with *Tectona grandis*, *Terminalia tomentosa* and *Anogeissus latifolia* being dominant. Some of the rare and threatened plant species here are *Boswellia ovalifoliolata* (Family Burseraceae), *Pimpinella tirupatiensis* (Umbelliferae), *Brachystelma glabrum*, *B. volubile* (Asclepiadaceae), *Andrographis beddomei*, *A. nallamalayana*, *Dicliptera beddomei* (Acanthaceae), and *Chrysopogon velutinus* (Gramineae) (see Henry et al., 1979, JBNHS 75:

684-697). The flora of this district and the surrounds of Rayalseema and Andhra Carnatic has been documented by Gamble & Fischer (1915-1935; *Flora of the Presidency of Madras*, 3 vols), Ellis (1968, *Bull. Bot. Surv. India*, 10: 149-160; *Flora of Nallamalais*, 1987—), Suryanarayana (1980, *JBNHS* 76: 240-258; Venkatagiri Hills of Velikondas), and Sastry & Ananda Rao (1973, *BBSI* 15: 92-107; coastal Andhra), besides perhaps a few other smaller papers. Dr T. Pullaiah and his associates, based at Anantapur, are currently working on the southern Andhra flora. It may also be noted that there are some 23 Protected Areas (National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries) in Andhra Pradesh of which Cuddapah District, surprisingly, has just one — Lankamalleswara WLS (464 sq. km) on the Lankamala Hills north of Cuddapah town, created to protect the endangered Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*). Another WLS has been proposed as the "Penusila Narasimha" which will cover the Palkonda range, E and SE of Cuddapah. Besides this, a small portion of the Venkateswara WLS (354 sq. km) also lies on the extreme south-east of Cuddapah District. Here, endemic tree species like *Shorea talura*, *S. tumbuggaia*, *Syzygium alternifolium*, *Terminalia pallida* and the tree-fern *Cycas beddomei* occur.

Now, we will focus on the avifauna so far recorded from here. In Part I of this paper published as my Letter # 64 (*Pitta n.s.*, 1(4): 3-6; 2004) I had given a brief idea of previous work done and published on the birds of Cuddapah District, and mentioned that some 271 species were confirmed here by Riyazuddin and myself, my own list being of 141 taxa (species/race). The larger, homogenous, biogeographically uniform area is what I have termed the "Rayalseema—Andhra Carnatic" sub-area (see *Pitta* No. 122-123, Letter # 44; 2001). Using the distribution maps of "species" given in the recent illustrated POCKET and FIELD GUIDES, I have prepared lists of birds currently recorded from each biogeographical area, where the Rayalseema—Andhra Carnatic has 467 species (51 of these need confirmation) of which 176 are Indian sub-continent endemics. I have just been sent (courtesy P. Jeganathan) Bharat Bhushan's (1994) Checklist of the "Eastern Ghats" birds in his doctoral thesis (pp. 245-278), which is both a compilation from published data, as well as his own original observations, and totals 438 species. But, this is inclusive of records from the Northern Circars (Andhra north of Godavari) which, I maintain, belong to the Central Highlands biogeographical area. So, I am not able to use Bhushan's thesis data unless I have details of actual localities where he has seen species listed or of those he has cited from literature. The only selectively compiled, complete, database for Andhra Pradesh birds is the Checklist prepared by Taher & Pittie (1989) plus the additions published by them in *Mayura* (11: 1-5; 1996). These authors had made three "distinct geographical divisions" of this State and I have prepared a list of birds recorded by them from their "Eastern Ghat Range" and "Eastern Coastal Plains" divisions and tallied it with Bhushan's Checklist. Biogeographically, locations north of the Godavari River attributed to these divisions by Taher & Pittie belong correctly to the Central Highlands area, so this contributes an "error factor" to both Taher & Pittie's and Bharat Bhushan's checklists, which do not tally properly! Even so, pending removal of those species that are found only north of the Godavari, I have compiled a total of 529 taxa from Andhra south and east of the Deccan Plateau (Telengana or the Andhra Deccan). Adding a further 39 recorded species that I have found from the Rayalseema—Andhra Carnatic which are omitted by Taher, Pittie and Bhushan, we have a possible "grand total" of some 568 taxa (species/race) of birds from the Rayalseema—Andhra Carnatic, plus the Circars (Andhra) portion of my Bastar—Circars sub-area of the Central Highlands. It therefore remains to be ascertained by literature review (accurate), and original field work, exactly how many bird species are resident in, or visitors to, the Cuddapah District.

I must point out to serious bird watchers here that, ultimately, the only authentically accurate compilation of such checklists of birds recorded from any defined area, be it political (District, etc.) or biogeographic, is for one (or a team) to search original publications as well as unpublished field notes (or illustrations) and check museum specimens (skins, eggs, pulli) to find relevant databases. One must not rely on what we scientists call "secondary sources," or published compilations of original data which tend to be "taken for granted" by current workers who do not have the training to evaluate accuracy or the scientific wherewithal to analyse available data. In several cases, confirming the correct IDs of bird species/races in published databases will also be necessary. It is here that I feel sorry to see that modern "Pop Birding" cares so little for truth and confirmed fact than how scientific ornithology was carried out in the past even by so-called naturalists of the Victorian era who mostly used scientific names to communicate their findings to others and were not handicapped by currently popular "common names" of bird taxa. Too much is taken at "face value" nowadays by a generation (or two) that looks for the easy way out, or a short-cut, to acquire a personal "image" of achievement or capability, using mechanical tools and computer programmes, but not their brains, good genes or character.

This Part II of my Letter has taken a lot of space to allow me to be able to apprise you here of the Cuddapah District bird scene and give the background necessary to understand enough to be capable of evaluating and analysing past or future writings, or material, on this subject and territory. Hence, let me encapsulate the gist of this article "in numbers" which will serve to convey the database on Cuddapah District Ornithology that Riyaz and I have uncovered so far, through our original field work and literature review. As I have written earlier, the SYNOPSIS and HANDBOOK numbers are as or more usable and accurate as are common English or scientific bird names, and enable a link in continuity from the present back in time to Jerdon's THE BIRDS OF INDIA (1862-1864), through individual species (or race) numbers cited for each taxon recognized by succeeding authors of major databases. Part III of this Letter will expand, in literary effort, on the birds recognized and confirmed (or not) by myself in Cuddapah District. Suffice it then here to leave my readers with this "hors d'oeuvre" as an appetizer before serving them the main meal next time!

SYNOPSIS/HANDBOOK TAXA NUMBERS CONFIRMED FROM THE CUDDAPAH DISTRICT BY KUMAR GHORPADÉ :
 5 - 27 - 28 - 29 - 37 - 42 - 44 - 46 - 47 - 49 - 60 - 61 - 70 - 88 - 97 - 104 - 105 - 108 - 111 - 114 - 133 - 138 - 147 - 151 - (152) - 157 - 172 - 187 - 189 - 193 - 195 - 211 - 222 - 246 - 252 - 344 - 350 - 358 - 366 - 370 - 380 - 382 - 397 - 401 - 441 - (449) - 454 - 458 - 463 - 507 - 517 - 534 - 535 - 537 - 541 - 550 - 572 - 590 - 595 - 602 - 652 - 694 - 700 - 703 - 707 - 719 - 724 - 736 - 744 - 748 - 750 - 756 - 767 - 792 - 874 - 878 - 883 - 907 - 916 (or 917 ?) - 923 - 940 - 946 - 949 - 953 - 963 - 982 - 994 - 1006 - 1010 - 1034 - 1049 - 1057 - 1070 - 1077 - 1079 - 1081 - 1093 - 1098 - 1128 - 1135 - 1138 - 1154a - 1221 - 1231 - 1254 - 1258 - 1262 - 1267 - 1438 - 1445 - 1452 - 1460 (or 1461 ?) - 1498 - 1504 - 1511 - 1517 - 1521 - 1535 - 1549 - 1556 - 1562 - 1570 - 1578 - 1661 - 1701 - 1720 - 1726 - 1857 - 1859 - 1875 - 1891 - 1899 - 1907 - 1911 - 1917 - 1934 - 1938 - 1949 - 1957 - 1966 - 1974 [= 139 taxa, 2 doubtful in parentheses].

Note: The Taher & Pittie Checklist, as well as Kazmierczak's FIELD GUIDE, also carry these vital numbers but the "Grimmett & Inskip's" books do not.

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Destination KONDA KARLA-VA
By
Raajeev Mathews

Cradled in the foothills of the Eastern Ghats is the beautiful lake of Konda Karla-va; and my wanderings took me to this very vibrant lake. Here, I met my friend the forest watcher who is a knowledgeable chap, but alas! He spoke in Telugu; and though I am good at it – though the accent terrible – I could not fathom the names of birds he reeled off. Therefore, with a field guide full of pictures as interpreter, we set off on one of the most thrilling bird watching trips I have undertaken so far.

Birding on foot, bi-cycles, motor vehicles and boats are all too familiar. What I had never dreamed of was a bird watching trip on a lake, seated on an up-turned charpoy (cot made of wood and ropes) that acts as a vice in holding the two Palmyra palm dugouts together. My friend the local birdwatcher, employed with the forest department and I set out on this contraption propelled by two pole wielding, able-bodied fishermen, who rigged this thing together. I was a little worried when I saw that the cone shaped dugouts were neither tied nor nailed but married together by this rhomboid and inverted charpoy. Moreover, the cause for concern was their divorce in mid-waters over some disagreement, which was a grave possibility.

The bio-mechanical propellers propelled us noiselessly through the Typha and weeds, and there amongst the reeds we spied the Blue-breasted Banded Rail that quietly stalked the stalks, looking intently, while keeping very still for any frogs, fish or insects that might put in an appearance. The Ruddy Crakes kept flying about; their legs dangling crimson red – seeming more like weeds in which they live – under them. Attention is always arrested by music, and I being no exception; stopped. The Large Reed Warblers were pouring out their liquid song, perched atop the grasses and sedges; from which we now emerged, that lined the lake shore.

I then saw a very exuberant lot of purple flash in very green, young paddy. The Purple Moorhen were at work, bringing to naught the toils of a farmer with zeal. Not too far from this rabble of smartly liveried rouges in purple vesture, red skull caps, masks and red stockings, were a flock of Whimbrels – the drably clothed plain Janes – heads bowed, probing the mud for whatever they eat, conscious of their fancifully dressed, vociferous and cocky neighbours.

As the rigged contraption moved into the lake, little ducks flew all around us; emerald green with white lace work screaming in a very guttural army sergeants' voice commanding all their kind to "Fix your Bayonet"; and like an air force of Lilliputs took off from close to a couple of blundering Gullivers on their bird

watching expedition. These were the tiny Cotton Teal – the smallest ducks in India.

Looking into the waters was like looking at the overgrown head of Medusa the Gorgon; tendrils of water plants spiralling up and swaying gently in the currents, belying their strength to snare some unfortunate. The water lilies festooned the surface with their multi-coloured flowers, as if an adornment on her head.

In the distance was a very hazy grey in a trellis of Ipomoea. I looked hard to decipher the mass. A plume raised some movement about, all suddenly bobbing; the branches of the Ipomoea, on closer examination seemed festooned with the same grey fleece. A closer and better look from another angle showed them as the Asian Open-billed Storks. We moved further to see a large flock of swordsmen prodding and probing an unplanted, squelchy plot of land. The Godwits were having a field day picking the worms and crustaceans that lurk under the surface. Little Stints were running in a frenzy and then, as if on cue, took off from a little patch they called runway. Their aerial display kept us from going further and their orderly mad flight had the same effect on their friends in a neighbouring patch. They joined forces and flew formations that would put the best air force to shame.

The gullible terns or were they Gull-billed Terns (?) flew all over, turning and diving into the lake and then, escaping Medusa's tresses. They were a dainty picture in their white angelic attire as they milled about and showed off – as a white and silver shimmer – in the afternoon sun. The Jacanas, both the Bronze-winged and the Pheasant-tailed were trying to impress the others of their prowess to walk the adornment on Medusa's head. The afternoon sun showed them off as very glamorous and dainty models walking the ramp. They seemed to know, or why would they stop in mid-step, raise a wing and stretch a leg and beckon to a crowd of an assortment of life forms. They were big flirts too! The Red Crested Pochards were red in the face with the antics of the Jacanas. They swam with dignity and kept pretty much to themselves; having a proud air about them, moving with other expatriates – the handsome purple-brown crowned, white eye-browed, blue winged – blue blooded Adonis – the Garganey Teal and the Common Teal sporting the mask of Zorro. Then, on the shores, we chanced upon the Ruffs – not roughnecks – and their petite Reeves that were industriously helping a farmer get rid of the little insects and worms undermining his crops. They also, I am sure took some earthworms, but then is not it a bonus and a treat!

After watching them and many more such dramas which had unfolded before us, we repaired back to where we started; my friend the birdwatcher enjoying the trip as much as I did, having got for the first time an unlimited use of a pair of binoculars and a field guide full of pictures!

RANDOM RAMBLINGS - Humayun Taher
(With inputs from Hyder Jaffer)

I've just been thinking about a small area I used to visit regularly some few years ago. I've been told that the place now has been completely "plotted out" and, no doubt, the new tenants will soon be descending *en-masse* to stake their claim and commence construction of those modern monstrosities, the apartment blocks and similar ghastly structures. This bit of news saddens me beyond description, because the Nadergul area is a paradise for die-hard raptorphiles and other-bird-watchers like myself.

Nadergul lies about 30 kilometers from Charminar on the Falaknuma side, in Hyderabad, very close to Mamidipally Forest Nursery. I'm not going to be more specific because I'm a bit selfish about this spot and would like it to remain secret; (another reason is that I couldn't possibly explain how to get to Nadergul, through the many tiny zigzagging lanes and by-lanes, on paper. If I draw a map, it would baffle geometrists...!) Anyway, suffice to say that the place is very much within the city limits and already, as I pointed out, earmarked for construction and subsequent destruction. The area is mostly open grasslands (cleared away scrub cover, of course), with rocky outcrops and the odd acacia bush here and there, looking forlorn and out of place in this wasteland. There is the odd toddy palm grove here and there, with pots hanging under the crowns of the trees, and the toddy-tapper sleeping under the tree. The most remarkable spot however, in this barren waste, is a small ravine, about 30 feet deep that runs about 1000 yards, right in the midst of a flat wasteland area. This little ravine is very densely wooded - so densely in fact that, try as I might, I never succeeded in climbing down into it, much as I wanted to do so. Does this sound rather un-picturesque? Read on for some of the sightings I have from the place.

At one time, we saw more than 50 White-backed Vultures perched on the electricity pylons in the area. That alone is one for the record books. The sighting took place early one morning, when I was out looking for Kestrels to trap for the bird-ringing activities of the BSAP/BNHS. On that same trip I have seen what I can swear is a Lesser Kestrel - though I cannot substantiate the sighting and also that the Lesser Kestrel has not, hitherto, been reported from the Hyderabad region, or from the state of A.P. itself. (Also, my friend Hyder swears to having seen a Goshawk in this area; and Hyder knows his birds.)

That's not all; I have a record of a Lugger Falcon from the area, plus sundry Blackwinged Kites. A Shaheen Falcon was also sighted on one memorable occasion. On the nocturnal front, we have Great Horned and Short-eared Owls (co-incidental, that...!). In the larger raptors, we have Bonelli's and Booted Eagles and also a nesting Short-toed Eagle, that used to build in a solitary toddy palm tree in the midst of a flat table-like dryland. I believe that the tree has now been chopped down and the Eagles have gone off to areas unknown. Shikras also have been seen nesting in the area. Redheaded Merlins are seen now and then and we even have a record of a nesting pair not far away from this place, and in the same belt. In this area I have trapped and ringed more than 25 European Kestrels, over three seasons, apart from a couple of Red-headed Merlins and a few Shikras. White-eyed Buzzards are not exactly an uncommon sight, and we have met them here from time to time and we also have interesting sightings of non-accipitrine birds like the Sirkeer Cuckoo, lots of Indian Coursers and Yellow-eyed Babblers. Also nesting Red and Spotted Munias. Yellow-wattled Lapwings also were seen at one time, with their young ones, and we have records of Peafowl and both Grey and Painted Partridges. Quails (*spp?*) are a common sighting, as also Sandgrouse (*spp?*). This is also one of the very few areas around Hyderabad where we have seen three species of mammals in a single day; Chinkara, Jackal and Hyena. Hyder has a record of an adult Trinket Snake also from this area, and also Rock Pythons near the ravine. Monitor Lizards are also seen in and around the ravine.

One very interesting observation from this area was the discovery of the Bonelli's Eagle nest. Fortunately for the Eagles, they had chosen to build their nest on a rocky outcrop that stood within the walls of a Defence colony; and that was sufficient defence against egg-collectors and other assorted poachers (or nuisance-mongers who could disturb them unnecessarily). It cramped our observations too but, by climbing onto a neighbouring outcrop (outside the defence establishment), we could get a fair view of the nest through binoculars. If I am not wrong, the nest is still there, and still active. The interesting sighting was that as we watched the nest one afternoon, the adults were seen mating on a large boulder just above the nest. What made this sight even more interesting was the fact that there were already 2 chicks (about 15-20 days old), in the nest. (The sighting was made on 12th February 2002). On this same trip, we also saw, nearby, the nest of an Ashycrowned Finch Lark, with two eggs in it. (Hyder tells me that he saw the chicks on a later trip to the area).

My primary reason for mentioning and talking about this area in this issue of Pitta is that I would love to see this area given "Protected Status". Apart from all other considerations, so rewarding a birding spot deserves to be protected and kept alive for future generations of birdwatchers to enjoy. It also provides adventure to the rock-lovers from the weird and wonderful formations of granite columns and rock formations of all types. There is a rock here that looks exactly like a Unicorn, and the impression is further strengthened by a solitary dead palm tree that sticks out just where that legendary animal's horn was supposed to have been. Another rock formation looks just like a lion's head, complete with mane. Surely there is sufficient evidence here to justify its continued existence to provide the shelter it does to its assorted denizens that I have recorded above. Would anyone out there consider this appeal and make a determined effort to do something about this area.

Annual General Meeting of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh – Second (2nd) Notice dated 30th September 2004

The Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on 18th October 2004 (18.10.2004) at Vidyaranya High School, Saifabad. The timing of the meeting is 6.00 p.m. All members are requested to attend. The tentative programme for the meeting is given below:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 6) Any other Business

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PROGRAMME - January

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 9-i-2005: Manjira Barrage, Rangareddi District: Route Punjagutta – Ameerpet – Sanathnagar – Kukatpally – Patancheru – Sangareddy. From Sangareddy Mandal Office, turn left and go in for 3 km to the EEC centre. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 am and assemble at the EEC Centre. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Openbilled and Painted Storks that nest on islands in the reservoir. There are sure to be lots of ducks, especially Pintails, Pochards, Shovellers, Teal and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. Ospreys are often seen, as also Demoiselle Cranes. Look out also for Mugger Crocodiles in the lake. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

INDOOR MEETING: 17-i-2005, 6pm: Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the Press.

NOTES & NEWS

AN IMPROMPTU VISIT TO HIMAYAT SAGAR

TANK

By

Shafaat Ulla

It all started with Deccan Chronicle publishing a photograph of Flamingos wading in Himayat Sagar lake, about twenty kilometers south-east of Hyderabad city. Flamingos in Hyderabad? Impossible! The first to rush and satisfy their curiosity were Raajeev and Azam, our fellow members from BSAP, who promptly reported to us the wonderful sighting.

Next day, Wednesday 1st December, Aasheesh couldn't contain himself and I joined him early in the morning and we headed towards the lake, armed with binoculars and spotting scope and a variety of field guide books.

It was a sad sight that greeted us as far as the water is concerned, since the entire lake was dried up except for a small shallow patch of muddy water in the centre. This however, proved to be a boon for the birds as thousands of them, consisting of about thirty varieties, converged on the water body for an extended feast.

We could count about fifty Greater Flamingos foraging near the water's edge with their very special inverted beaks. So many flamingos with their beautiful pink feathers is indeed a very rare

sight in our area. The other surprise that awaited us was the presence of about 400 to 500 Open-billed Storks, whose main diet are snails, which obviously were plentiful. The other rarely seen birds were a couple of Avocets with their upturned slender bills and pure white plumage as if they had used Surf XL! Then there was a pair of equally rare Curlews, with their long and thin down-curved beaks, probing deep into the soft mud.

For bird lovers, it was a feast for the eyes, as we could see hundreds of ducks, consisting of Spotbills, Red-crested Pochards and Brahminy Ducks. As we were busy identifying the ducks, in flies four pairs of Barheaded Geese, who circled for a while before settling down. As if this was not enough, about twenty Spoonbills took off from the far end and flew overhead in a neat and unhurried formation with their odd spoon-shaped bills sticking out in front. .

There were a variety of other waders and we were going crazy identifying them, mainly because of the distance. Apart from the Blackwinged Stilts which were in excess of easily one hundred, there were Blacktailed Godwits, Ruffs, Redshanks and Sandpipers; as also Grey Herons, Painted Storks, Little and Median Egrets, et. al.

An exciting addition to our sighting was the *tamasha* that was being performed by the streamlined River Terns, doing beautiful aerobatics along with Black and Brownheaded Gulls, hovering over the nets of two fishermen who happened to be preparing

their dinner. Also in the fray was a graceful Brahminy Kite gliding effortlessly over the water looking to steal a tasty morsel.

Although we could have stayed the whole day, we had to rush back reluctantly, as it was a working day; but not before promising ourselves to come back soon with other birdwatchers, before the lake dries up completely and the birds bid us adieu to seek greener pastures elsewhere.

URBAN BIRDING

by

"The City Bird-Brain"

This column has had a two-fold advantage. Firstly, so I have been informed, it is making other members more aware of the birds surrounding them. Secondly, it is making me more aware of the birds around me – to take the first example that comes to hand: I have added a most unusual species to my list of urban birds. A Common Sandpiper was spotted in the bed of the rather dirty stream that runs behind the house. Now, this stream seems to be composed almost entirely of soapsuds and other rather gruesome looking objects (a dead rat, amongst other things...!), yet the Sandpiper was there, and piping away quite happily, it appeared. However, my object this week is not the Common Sandpiper; I want to focus this week's column on that most ubiquitous bird, the common House Crow.

Who does not know this bird – and yet I venture to assert that, with all the work done on this species, there will always be something new to observe if one only sets about observations over a long and sustained period. Their penchant for robbery and piracy is, of course, well known. When I was in the Crocodile Bank near Chennai, these birds were amongst the most unwelcome pests we have ever had. Not only were they partial to young crocs and other baby reptiles like tortoises and turtles, they also had developed a great taste for the crocodile food (fish and beef offal and bone). One could always tell the feeding day from other days from the huge number of crows that suddenly congregated from all over the district on the Croc Bank on feeding days. And in spite of all the hectic activity in the Croc enclosures to get at the food, I have never seen a crow wind up in a crocodile's mouth. Obviously their instinct for self-preservation is quite strong.

Talking of self-preservation, in the old days when we young lads were more adept in the use of the air rifle than the binoculars, I have put in many assiduous hours in the pursuit of House Crows. To no avail – the clever creatures were well aware of the difference between a rifle and a stick. Point a stick at them and they would cock an eye at you and caw in amusement. Appear on the scene carrying a rifle, or even a catapult, and the blackguards would be in flight long before you got within decent range.

I reckon there is only one other bird that can get the better of the House Crow in combat, and that is the Black Drongo. On the other hand, I have seen even the Small Blue Kingfisher delivering some hefty whacks with its bill on the back of a House Crow that appeared to have designs on the nest of the Kingfisher. The Drongo, on the other hand, knows what to do when a Crow appears and, what is more, the Crow knows this as well.

Consequently, they keep well away from the Drongos – why court unnecessary trouble, seems to be their motto. Quite intelligent too. But this very intelligence is used by the Koel in its habit of foisting its eggs onto the crows. Observe the male Koel appear near the nest of the crow while the female Koel slips up noiselessly from behind. Then, while the crows are in hot pursuit of her spouse, she flies into the unguarded nest, lays her eggs and slips out again with the crows none the wiser. Crows can count up to two and if, on their return to the nest, they can see more than two eggs, then they are quite happy and satisfied that the nest has not been tampered with. So the crows carry on with the domestic chores and, when the speckled Koel chicks hatch, they are quite proud of them. Not quite as intelligent as they are made out to be, apparently!

The House Crow has completely adapted itself to life in the city. So much so that, where there is no human activity, there will be found no crows. Don't take my word for it – go out to the jungles and do a count of how many crows you see. I guarantee that you will not have many, if at all. On the other hand, even without any attempt at counting, it is impossible to spend a day in any city without a sighting of at least a dozen odd crows here and there. And if you happen to live in an area where these chaps roost, then you will know all about it. They ensure that... through their noisy cawing and loud bedtime conversations before they finally drop off to sleep. And at times like this, they are likely to fall prey to the Great Horned Owl. The Owl knows the value of secrecy and silence in its pursuit of crows. If he gives himself away, there is no way he can make a kill on that particular night as all the crows in the roost will descend on him en-masse and hound him out of a year's growth! The wise owl ensures that the kill is made with all possible speed and with the minimum of noise and fuss.

With all its bad habits (breakfasting on a dead rat in the middle of the road, stealing whatever it can lay its beak on, etc. etc.,) I have a soft spot for this creature. He is so universally NOT LIKED that one cannot help feeling admiration that he survives, indeed thrives, in the midst of all this anti-crow movement. But at the same time be it mentioned that, if you have a liking for little birds nesting in your garden, then the crow is the last visitor you want. Great robbers of nests, these birds think nothing of taking eggs, young birds and even adult birds if they can catch them. That sickle bill is a most effective hunting weapon. I have seen a house crow making a meal off a warbler. Whether he had caught it himself or found it dead, I do not know; but I incline to the former. They are good hunters when they have to be.

Hunted too, are these birds. The cages in the Chowk bird market will always have a few rather sorry-looking crows peering hopefully out of the bars. Who would be wanting to buy them, I cannot say – but there must be a market, or the canny bird-dealer wouldn't be stocking the species. Maybe the practitioners of the black arts, the tantrics, use them for Black Magic. Or maybe they have other uses of a culinary nature...! Whatever the reason, they are there – I have seen more than 20 stuffed in a single cage, which couldn't hold more than 10 at the most.

They have their enemies in the wild as well – the Luger Falcon is partial to them as part of its diet. The odd crow will also find

its way into the belly of the Peregrine Falcon. But apart from the falcon tribe, the birds have few enemies to reckon with. And even the falcons are not always successful in having crows for lunch. That self-preservation instinct comes out even more strongly when the crows are pursued by a raptor. I have only a few times seen one caught – and that was mostly a solitary specimen, and not a member of a flock.

Talking of flocks, it is learnt that a flock of crows is collectively called a “murder”, than which there could be no more appropriate name. Put a “murder” of crows on the air and the music they manage to generate is sheer murder. I remember seeing a large rookery in Khammar once – about half a mile before you got to the place, you could hear it.

But enough of this subject or the goodwill I have managed to generate through this column will rapidly disappear if I go on about such creatures as the House Crows. I will merely reiterate that, no matter how much you think you know these birds, they will always produce something new that you had never noticed before. So put on those observation caps and spare some time to observe the House Crow. Until next time – Happy Birding!

Post-script: Apropos of seeing interesting birds in the city, here's a list of my latest sightings (on 12th December) in the backyard around the aforementioned dirty stream: Great Tit, Common White-Eye, Grey Wagtail, Whitebreasted Waterhen and Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher; to name just a few. Also a Spotted Owlet was heard just last night (13th December). For the interested; be it mentioned that I have around 15 km. of built-up area around my humble residence! All of which brings us back to the observation I made in the first of these memoirs that, whether we want them or not, the birds are there: And they can be seen also from time to time. Keep those eyes peeled...!

NIZAMABAD: AT LAST!

by
Arjun

September 10th - The trip to Nizamabad (after many postponements) was finally underway. The day dawned bright and clear as five of us (Mr Shafaat Ulla, Mr Bhaskar Rao, Ms Shweta Vyas, Ms Sheetal Vyas and yours truly) met at the Jubilee bus stand. It was not going to remain bright and clear though. We boarded the bus, bought our tickets, and finally, we were off. No sooner had we left the city limits, than it started raining. And rain it did, all the way to Nizamabad. Our host, Mr Ashok Kumar, received us at the bus stand. He had made arrangements for our stay, on the top floor of a school run by him.

We freshened up and went out for lunch. It was still raining. It rained all afternoon, washing out all chances of birding. Since no birding was possible, some of us did a bit of local sightseeing in the evening, which was very interesting. We visited the old fort, now divided into a prison and a temple. We climbed to the very top of the fort and from the window there we were able to catch a close view of a few Pariah kites (*Milvus migrans*) and House Swifts (*Apus affinis*) on the wing. This was followed up by a visit

to another temple and a church, which yielded us a fleeting glimpse of a large owl (at the temple), and two smaller ones at the church. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the owls remain unidentified. We then walked back, snacking on mirchi bhajjis on the way. We were joined later that night by another member, Priyank (who brought along with him, a GPS instrument). After enjoying dinner (which was a trifle delayed), we retired for the day.

September 11th - We got off to an early start, with everyone waking up at 5 AM. Thankfully it was not raining. We celebrated the fact with a round of tea, and set off in a jeep that was hired for us by our host. Our first stop was a lake called Ashokasagar ($18^{\circ}42.411'N$ $78^{\circ}02.190'E$. Alt: 384m). The sight that greeted us was that of a crab, pincers raised, not unlike a sheriff in a cowboy film, trying to keep outlaws out of his town. We saw a tree that was host to more than ten Baya weaver bird's nests. Some other notable sightings included, a Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus*), a Small Blue Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), hovering over the water, and an unidentified Eagle.

We moved along from there to another lake Alisagar ($18^{\circ}40.822'N$ $78^{\circ}00.628'E$. Alt: 387m). We were greeted (almost at the gate), by a Goldfronted Chloropsis (*Chloropsis aurifrons*). It gave us a pretty good look at it, almost as if it were a model at the India Fashion week. There were many Rose ringed Parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) there but not much else.

From there we moved on to yet another water body called Tanakala lake ($18^{\circ}40.132'N$ $78^{\circ}00.176'E$ Alt: 387m). This yielded quite a few interesting sightings, apart from the more commonly seen birds. We did see a few Redwattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*), a Blackbellied Finch-Lark (*Eremopterix grisea*), a Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*), a Spotted Munia (*Lonchura punctulata*) and a few Small Blue Kingfishers, but what really took the cake was the sighting of a group of twelve Black Headed Munias (*Lonchura malacca*). These munias put on quite a wonderful show for us, a song and dance show. Twelve of them sitting on a single branch flitting here and there, jumping short distances, only to return, giving us a great view from almost every angle imaginable. It was very well choreographed indeed.

On the road from Tanakala, (position: $18^{\circ}37.984'N$ $77^{\circ}59.539'E$ Alt 381m) we came across a tree with many egrets congregated there. When we got down to get a closer look, we saw nearby a bush with more than twenty House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). On the other side of the road we saw a few Baya's nests. Now what was surprising was the fact that there was a White throated Munia (*Lonchura malabarica*) that was trying repeatedly to enter the Baya's nests, but the Bayas every time chased it away. What was the motive behind this? Was the munia looking for a quick snack? Was it trying to hijack the nest? Or was it just a nest-to-nest sales bird trying to earn an honest living?

We moved on to the lake behind the Somalingeshwar temple ($18^{\circ}24.752'N$ $77^{\circ}52.156'E$ Alt 372), where we saw some water birds like the Indian Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), Pheasant tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*) and Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*). The sighting that stood out here was

that of a Blackwinged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) hovering in the air for more than one and a half minutes. Apparently its prey got away that time because the hovering was not followed by a dive.

Moving on to yet another water body, Borlam lake ($18^{\circ}22.801'N$ $77^{\circ}54.307'E$. Alt: 406) we saw two Lesser Whistling Teals (*Dendrocygna javanica*), a Pied Kingfisher hunting successfully, a Large Pied Wagtail (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*), a Baybacked Shrike (*Lanius vittatus*), a Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) and a female Bush Chat. Moving on from this location we saw a eucalyptus tree with thirty five bats roosting on it.

After this we stopped for lunch at Banswada. Fortified, we then travelled towards Nizamsagar. We took a road that was right along a canal, leading to Nizamsagar. Some of the sightings were, a Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*), a Small Blue Kingfisher was also seen, holding a fish in its beak, without swallowing. House Swifts were nesting under a bridge. Another great sight was that of a Red Munia (*Estrilda amandava*), a funny sight was that of a Large Pied Wagtail chasing away a House Swift when it tried to land on the ground near it. We also saw Redwattled Lapwing nesting on the canal bed (which was mostly dry except for a few puddles here and there). We then turned on to a proper tarmac road, going towards Nizamsagar. On the way a spectacular sight met our eyes-- a pair of Egyptian Vultures (*Neophron percnopterus*), sitting on the top of a bald tree; this sight especially in the evening light was an amazing one. We went on to the Nizamsagar bus stop, where we stopped for refreshments, but the real refreshing sight was that of a few Common Grey Hornbills (*Tockus birostris*) that flew across, as we were sitting down to drink tea. We then went to this village Voddepalli. On the way there, we saw some Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). The village had this massive tamarind tree on which there were hundreds and hundreds of Cormorants and Egrets roosting, more and more coming in as we watched. It was getting dark by this time so we decided to cut our trip short and head back home. On the way back, during a stop, we were treated to

an amazing sight. The rains had washed the sky clean and we could now see stars all around. It was like being in the planetarium, only no seats, but then again, there was no charge either. We headed home and after dinner turned in.

September 12th- Another early start. This time we travelled to Mallaram forest ($18^{\circ}37.090'N$ $78^{\circ}02.827'E$ Alt: 412m), not very far from Nizamabad. On the road we saw a couple of Common Quails (*Coturnix coturnix*).

In the forest we saw two Spotbilled Ducks (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) and a few Lesser Whistling Teals flying overhead. A Common Green Pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera*) was spotted almost hidden away in the foliage. A Pigmy Woodpecker (*Picoides nanus*) was also spotted. We had our breakfast in the jungle, next to a stream. It was delicious. Post breakfast we went deeper into the jungle, amongst the sightings there was, a pair of Small Minivets (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*), Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*), White browed fantail Flycatcher (*Rhipidura aureola*). Other than the birds, the forest had some amazing rock formation, One rock was shaped like a mushroom, another looked like a Big Mac burger (maybe that was because all that birding had made us hungry). We headed out of the jungle and near the jeep we saw a couple of munias building a nest. From there we moved to a couple more spots, but these did not yield too many more interesting birds. We went to our host's house for lunch, and what a fabulous lunch it was. After lunch we went to the school where we packed our bags and then went on to the bus stop, where we said our goodbyes, and boarded the bus back to Hyderabad. We are thankful to Mr Ashok Kumar and his family, who put us up and took very good care of us.

The trip was a memorable one, and in spite of the small size of the group we had a great time.

Notice - Annual General Meeting of the Society

The Annual General Meeting of the Society, which was to be held in October 2004, had to be postponed twice owing to unavoidable circumstances. **The Annual General Meeting is now scheduled to be held on Monday, 21st February 2005 at 6.00 p.m., at Vidyaranya School, Saifabad.** All members are requested to make a note of the date and time and to be present for the same. The Agenda for the meeting is given below:

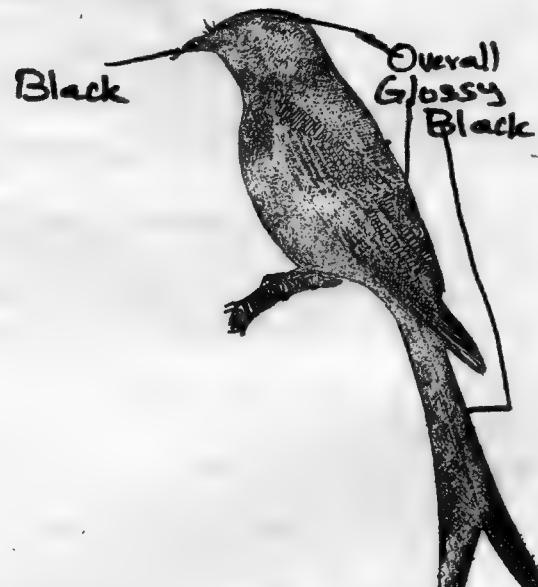
- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 6) Any other Business

FIELD CRAFT - Siraj A Taher and Sachin Jaltare

DRONGOS: These are black birds with long forked tails. They inhabit both forest and open country where they perch on exposed points looking for insect prey. Drongos are rather noisy and often solitary.

BLACK DRONGO

(*Dicrurus macrocercus*)
L = 31 cms. Bulbul +
Sexes alike



Black

Overall
Glossy
Black

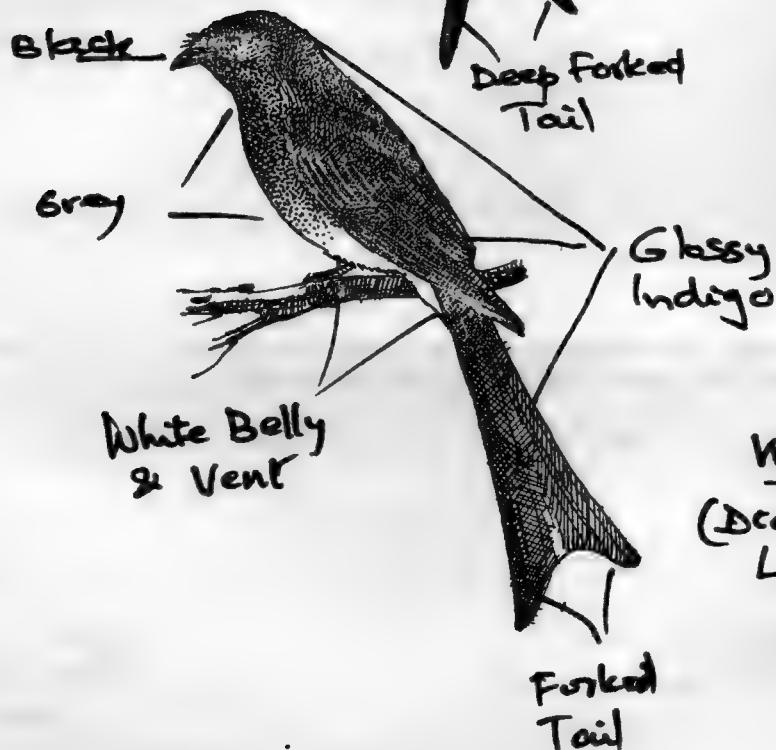
Dark Glossy
Ashy-grey

ASHY DRONGO

(*Dicrurus leucophaeus*)

L = 30 cms
Bulbul +
Sexes alike

Deep
Forked
Tail



Deep Forked
Tail

Glossy
Indigo

White Belly
& Vent

Forked
Tail

WHITE-BELLIED DRONGO

(*Dicrurus caerulescens*)
L = 24 cms; Bulbul +
Sexes alike

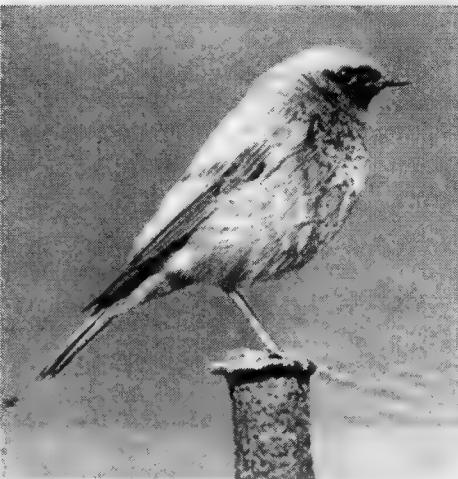
BIRD OF THE MONTH - THE BLACK REDSTART (*Phoenicurus ochruros*)

The Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) is a small passerine bird that was formerly classed as a member of the Thrush family (*Turdidae*), but is now more generally considered to be an Old World flycatcher (*Muscicapidae*).

It is a widespread breeder in south and central Europe, but very localised in Great Britain. It is resident in the milder parts of its range, but northern birds winter in southern Europe or North Africa. It nests in crevices or holes in buildings.

It is more common in Britain as a bird of passage and winter visitor. On passage it is fairly common on the east and south coasts.

Reports of early Common Redstarts (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*) may sometimes refer to this species. The "fire" of the tail labels the bird as a Redstart, but it may be distinguished from the Common Redstart, which is the same size at 14 cm length, by its sootier appearance, even when the distinctive white wing patch is not apparent, as in immature males.



The male has no chestnut on the flanks nor white on the forehead. The female is greyer than the Common Redstart, and at any age the grey axillaries and under wing-coverts are distinctive. In the Common Redstart these are buff or chestnut.

The Black Redstart in most parts of India, is the harbinger of the winter migration. Late in October, the birds begin to appear - and that generally means that the monsoon is now officially over and winter has started to take over. As a herald, it may not be as accurate as the Pied Crested Cuckoo is for the monsoons, but it is still an unfailing sign to all concerned that it is time to take those sweaters and jackets out of the cupboard and air them in readiness for the coming cold season.

Seeing that the Redstarts are in, and they being the forerunner of the winter inward migration, it is somehow appropriate that we begin our series on the Bird of the Month, with this species, the Black Redstart.

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I, Aasheesh Pittie, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Hyderabad
26 February 2004

Sd. Aasheesh Pittie
Signature of Publisher

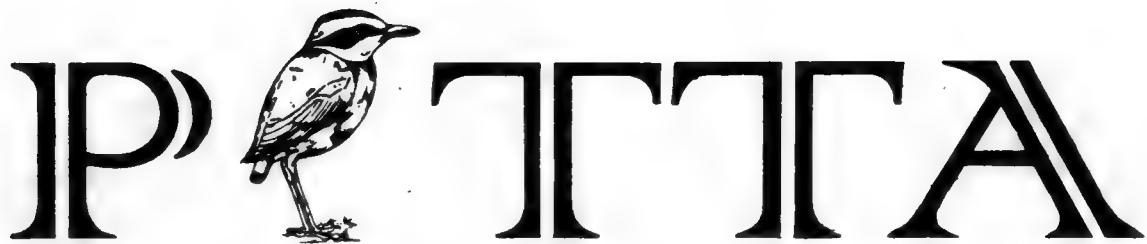
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Field Outing

Thursday, 16-vi-2005: Chilkur Deer Park, Hyderabad

Mendipatnam: Langar House: A P Police Academy. Meet at the venue by 6.45 a.m. This will be a half-day trip. Chilkur is rich in small woodland birds – there should be warblers and some flycatchers around as well. Members of the pheasant family also are particularly well-represented. Keep an ear open for the calls of the Painted Partridge. Peafowl, Grey Partridge and Quail also are often seen. For those who love those LBJ's it's absolute paradise! The youngsters will have lots of Chital to look at – maybe the odd Sambar will also appear. Look for the Oriole nest near the EEC. There should also be a Spotted Munia nest in the vicinity. Carry plenty of water and snacks.

Sunday, 26-vi-2005: Narsapur Reserve Forest, Medak

Meet near the small temple at the side of the road by the milestone. Sightings include many interesting species like the Pygmy and Mahratta Woodpeckers, both species of Chloropsis, and possibly Spangled Drongo as well. Woodland birds are a certainty, possibly also Indian Pitta, Ground Thrush and Paradise Flycatcher. On the lake, there will be River Terns and maybe Cotton Teals and Openbilled Storks. Look out for the larger owls, both Great Horned and Brown Fish Owl. Crested Serpent Eagle and maybe a Crested Hawk-Eagle also may well be seen if really lucky. This will be a full day trip; carry packed lunches and plenty of water.

For further details contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098) or Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 20-vi-2005, 6 p.m.:

Vidyaranya High School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad. Programme will be announced in the press

NEWS & NOTES

Flamingos (and more) at Osman Sagar

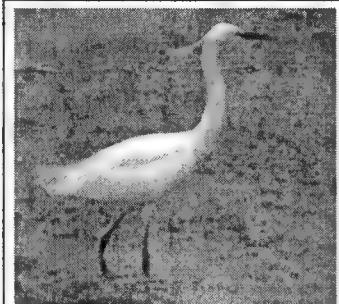
By Suhel Quader

Alerted by a short article in The Hindu newspaper the previous day, a small group of us sets out for Osman Sagar (on the western outskirts of Hyderabad) early on 9 May hoping to see Greater Flamingos. There is scarcely any water in the lake; the far shore is depressingly close to the bund, and rocks and old structures stand out of the water, bone dry. Fifteen or twenty fishermen paddle about in the

knee-deep water. On the northern and southern shores, small knots of lorries cluster around shallow excavations in the dry lake bed. Bare-torsoed men dig up clods of red earth and load them into the trucks, bound, no doubt, for a construction site in the city. In the distance, a single man makes his way purposefully to the lake's edge, there to commune with nature

and, perhaps, to contemplate the receding wavelets while doing so.

Having installed ourselves at the southern edge of the lake bund, we (Aasheesh and Prakriti Pittie, and I) almost immediately see the birds we are looking for, in a loose cluster in the shallows surprisingly close to a couple of earth-lorries. The flamingos waver unsteadily in the sights of our spotting scopes, their heads zigzagging underwater as though each has lost a valuable coin and is frantically feeling for it. A quick count reveals about 50 birds (49, 52, and 52 are the numbers from the three observers) in that flock. Scanning elsewhere, we find a few more flamingos – some singles, two groups of three – bringing the total to about 60. Some of these latter are small enough and pink enough to look suspiciously like Lesser Flamingos, but distance defeats a definitive ID.



A Little Egret showing off its aigrettes at Osman Sagar

An almost-dry lake sounds like a depressing place, but not so Osman Sagar today. The lake and its edges are full of birds. Egrets of all descriptions (well, all right: **three** species) dot the lakeshore, keeping a dainty distance from the sombre-looking Grey Herons. Openbill Storks straggle all along the shoreline, some probing with their strange beaks into the not-yet-baked-hard mud about 30 metres

from the water's edge. A few Painted Storks manage to look decorative perched high upon a tall pile of boulders with whitewashed tops. Little bands of Blackwinged Stilts in non-breeding plumage pick their careful way along the water's edge, and the melancholy "tiu-tiu" call of the odd Greenshank wafts its way across to us. Far across the lake, a huge flock of about a thousand cormorants stands on a spit of land, silent and orderly, like nuns awaiting smoke signals heralding the new pope.

The water itself contains the expected waterfowl in the low hundreds: Spot-billed Ducks, Lesser Whistling Teal, and Cotton

Pygmy-geese (Cotton Teal to you and me). But also some surprises: a lone Brahminy Duck, and four or five Shovelers in a flock; silent rebels against migration's call. Several godwits have also decided to stay back for the summer, and these probe desultorily in the shallows.

Yet more birds in the air above the lake. A handful of Pariah Kites wheel around as is their



A pensive Openbill

habit. One or two Brahminy Kites hang about as if waiting for something to happen. A gull wafts by, and several terns – of both the River and the Whiskered persuasion. Then, wait – it's a tern, it's small, with a black belly and white wings, but its head and back are also black, contrasting with a snow-white tail which is short and square-ended. Quick, where is the book? Krys-with-the-unpronounceable-surname; Plate 39; Plate 40; Plate 41; here we are! It must be.. But wait! It's confusable with.. we need another look – does it have a black armpit? This is critical. Here it comes again and this time we're ready – two with binoculars, one on the scope. Yes! It's official – a new bird for the region: a White-winged Tern (*Chlidonias leucopterus*, if you're finicky about these things) in full breeding plumage. The tern seems to be working a regular circuit: it passes by our section of the lake once every 15 minutes or so, and we get good views every time. Well done and congratulations all around! I think we should all go on impulsive birding trips more often, don't you?

Postscript:



Pariah Kite "wheeling": this is a specialised kind of flight defined by its apparent aimlessness

The following Sunday (the 15th) a group of about 40 birders and friends gather at Osman Sagar. An attempt to broaden the audience by inviting the public to come and appreciate the flamingos has failed because none of the newspapers that promised to carry the story actually did so. Still, we are rewarded with an excellent morning's birding. The flamingos are there, as are a few other should-be-gone-north ducks: a Garganey here, a couple of handsome Pintails there. And also another surprise: a lone Spot-billed Pelican! This fine individual (a juvenile, judging from its brown plumage) starts the morning on the far side of the lake, standing on the bank next to the water, and preening. When we look again half an hour later, it has moved much closer – right across from us, and very clear through each of the three spotting scopes we have set up. Here, it perches sedately on a rock, flanked on either side by a Painted Stork, the whole scene looking carefully arranged for our benefit.

And of course there is much other birding besides the spectacle of unusual species. Purple Herons and Purple Moorhens stalk the bare banks of the lake, looking quite out of place away from their usual marshy habitat. Swallows and Martins, Swifts and Pratincoles, the list goes on. But finally, as the sun climbs relentlessly in the sky, the fishermen start to trickle away with the day's catch. The air starts shimmering in the heat and it's time for us to effect a prudent retreat.

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

When the mango fruit hangs heavy on the branches of the mango trees, there is one bird that is generally always seen in the gardens – a flash of gold and yellow, with a touch of black. This is the immediate impression of the discerning person when he first sets eyes on the Golden Oriole – though some people prefer to call him the mango bird. A very apt title; as the birds generally appear with the ripe mangoes, and if possessed of a little imagination, it is not difficult to mistake one of these birds for a mango, either.

Golden Orioles are not frequently encountered in the city and, as such, it is perhaps a bit presumptuous of me to label them as urban birds. However, they are seen often enough in fruit orchards and, if you happen to have a mango tree in the vicinity, then you will know all about it as they are generally always to be seen hopping around in the branches. Therefore, we will give them the status of urban birds this once – if for no other reason than that I have just yesterday seen one arrive on the food tray in the balcony. It was a male bird too and he managed to dazzle me with his gold and black plumage to such an extent that I immediately took pen and paper and started to tell about him and his ilk.

A Golden Oriole is a most handsome bird. The male, with his striking gold and yellow plumage relieved by the black wings, and the female, a duller more greenish version of her mate, are distinctly pleasing to the eyes. What is not so nice about them is their sound-box. It is true that one seldom has double-strings to his bows and what is pleasing to the eyes need not necessarily be pleasing to the ears, but surely that harsh croaking sound is most unfortunate, especially proceeding from the throat of a bird otherwise so uniformly splendid. Still, the hen bird seems to think much of her spouse's song and she happily joins in and the pair perform much duets together. Then they set about the onerous duties of building a neat little nest in the crotch of some scrubby tree, or suspended from the tip of a thin bough of some leafy forest monarch and, so protected from harm, they lay their eggs, hatch them out and produce very endearing little miniatures of themselves. A male Golden Oriole, with his olive branches in tow is a most comical sight. There he goes, hopping from branch to branch; and there too go the stubby-tailed little orioles, hopping just like father, occasionally tripping over their feet and having to flap their little wings hard to regain balance – the while teetering between falling and standing...

It may sometimes happen that the novice will mistake a male Common Iora with one of these birds – it is with a sense of some shame that I confess I was myself once guilty of this misidentification. I plead excuse however in the fact that I was very young then (both in age and in identification skills); though I often get chafed for this *faux pas*, and I have never really managed to live it down yet.

I have seen these birds nesting in the heart of the city, and far away from it. I recollect a nest sighting in Sanjivayya Park, which is right in the heart of the city. True that the nest was

overshadowed and passed over in the light of the discovery of a Pied Myna nest on the same tree – but it was there; and the hen was incubating as well. I noted that she never strayed far from the nest. Occasionally the male came and relieved her, but her idea of relief was a quick aerial sortie, a hasty bite at a caterpillar or a moth, and then back home to her brood. A model housewife, I thought her to be...

The other nest I saw was in Chilkur. Suspended on the end of a thin bough of a tree near the EEC, I was first attracted to the nest by the sight of the cock bird flying in and relieving his mate of her duties. Here too, the hen was a most conscientious mother – she made one brief swoop through the trees and was back at her post. The cock rubbed beaks with her and then flew off while she settled herself back on her eggs with, doubtless, a sigh of relief.

In Madras, at the Crocodile Bank near Mahabalipuram, there was an instance when the loud shrieking of Orioles brought me out in a hurry. A green Vine Snake was making its way towards the nest of these birds. The beady eyes of the snake were fixed intently on its target and it had eyes and ears for nothing else – not that it has ears in the first place anyway. However, so intent was the snake on the nest that it completely failed to take the adult birds into account and that was its undoing. The hen landed on the snake's back and pecked away vigorously; so startling the snake that he promptly lost his balance and fell to earth, he knew not where... Directly below the oriole nest was a large crocodile enclosure, and the snake fell straight into the pond. Fortunately for it, there was only one crocodile in that particular enclosure and that one was lying out basking in the sun. This enabled the Vine Snake to make a quick getaway and I don't think it went anywhere near that particular nest again. This told me that the Orioles can be exceedingly bold birds when they have to be. A bird that can attack a snake that is partial to birds as a large part of its diet is no ordinary bird. It argues a stout heart and a boldness of nature that it would be hard to overpraise.

The chap that visited the balcony had some interesting things to do. To start with, he decided that the bits of fruit lying in the buffet tray were not to his taste. So he gave those up and then proceeded to give a very passable imitation of a mouse as he nosed around in the corners of the walls, looking for midges or moths – though how he proposed to find them on the walls, he did not divulge to me. In his nosing, he came upon the potted shrub and discovered a caterpillar thereon, which he philosophically picked up, banged around a bit and then swallowed. A poor offering for so splendid a bird, but he was used to these things and took them in his stride. Having made quite certain that there were no more caterpillars around, he then nosed around a bit more, peered up at me with vague interest as I sat there beaming down at him, thought a bit about exploring under my chair, decided against it and then helped himself to a drink of water and flew off to the mango tree from whence he had originally come. No other

bird that has ever landed on my balcony has made me feel so completely humble and ashamed that I had not proper food to offer them. Maybe I should take a leaf out of the Oriole's book and make some arrangement to keep a supply of moths or caterpillars available at the food tray!

I don't think that many people will know that the cousin of these birds, the Blackheaded Oriole is also sometimes seen. However, be it mentioned that this other chap is mostly a

forest species and will not condescend to visit the garden or the balcony food tray. It believes, not without reason, that the best way to avoid getting endangered is to stay away from danger. Very sensible of him, I must admit; though it pains me that I have never really managed to get a good eyeful of this chap. But then, hope springs eternal...

So this month, eat plenty of mangoes, and keep watching the Golden Oriole. Until next month, Happy Birding...!!

CLIPPINGS

Wren-babbler found after 50 years

18-05-2005

On 18 November 2004 Ben King and Julian P. Donahue rediscovered the Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* in India's Arunachal Pradesh region. The species had not previously been seen for more than fifty years.



The wren-babbler was refound at an elevation of 6,000 feet (1,800 m) on the Roing-Hunli road, in the Dibang River drainage of the Mishmi Hills, eastern Himalaya. The bird initially responded to a tape-recording of its nearest relative, the Rufous-throated Wren - its responses were

Babbler *Spelaeornis caudatus* was recorded and played back, with excellent results.

Rusty-throated Wren-Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* was described by Ripley in 1948, based upon a unique female specimen mist-netted by the Ripley party on 5 January 1947 at an elevation of 5,100 feet (1,545 m) at Dreyi, on the Lohit River drainage of the Mishmi Hills. There had been no additional records or field observations of the species for almost 58 years until now.

"We had little difficulty locating the furtive, active bird, from its vocalisations and the movement of the dense roadside undergrowth, but it took an hour of effort to observe enough 'pieces' of the bird to conclusively identify it." —Julian P. Donahue

The team subsequently learned that the species is easily located (but excruciatingly difficult to observe) on the roadside between Roing and Hunli, on both the north and south sides of Mayodia Pass (elev. 2,655 m), in broadleaf evergreen forest at elevations of 5,100-7,700 feet (1,545-2,330 m); one day they elicited responses from seven different birds along just one kilometer of road.

The species is currently classified by BirdLife as Vulnerable.

By Julian P. Donahue

Mysterious birds of Assam keep plunging to death.

Jatinga, India [AFP] -- A bizarre phenomenon of flocks of birds committing "suicide" in this remote village in India's northeastern state of Assam has foaxed experts and the strange behaviour remains a mystery.

From August to October, when the night is moonless and foggy, accompanied by wind and drizzle, Jatinga, a village on a ridge in the North Cachar Hills district, 334 km south of Assam's capital Guwahati, turns into an island of searchlights and lanterns. Armed with catapults and bamboo poles, groups of villagers assemble outside their homes almost every night with torch flames and lanterns hung overhead, waiting for the "dying birds." And in no time, the slopes and hills of Jatinga buzz with the twitter of species of birds in agony, plummeting to the ground like ghosts from nowhere.

For almost three hours until midnight, the tiny hamlet becomes a nightmare for a bevy of birds that come dashing to the light source to be captured and killed by villagers. Curiously, most of the birds do not attempt to fly away from the lights. They look dazed and dishevelled, almost traumatised by the experience. The villagers get going in no time, bringing down birds hovering around the light sources by a vigorous swing of the bamboo poles. They use catapults to shoot those in flight or those perching on trees and bushes nearby.

"In the past, the haul of one night sometimes reached 500 to 600 birds with around 200 as the maximum by one person," Heren Langthasa, a tribal villager said. "But now a single person in one night manage to catch 50 to 60 birds," Langthasa told AFP.

Legend has it that the Zemi Naga tribal villagers at Jatinga were the first to witness the phenomenon in the late 19th century when disoriented birds in their thousands flocked to a bonfire lit by the locals in a paddy field to scare away wild pigs. The experience frightened them, as they believed the birds were evil spirits

swooping down from the sky. Eventually the Zemi Naga tribe deserted Jatinga.

The Jaintias, another tribe which moved to Jatinga in 1905, stumbled on the phenomenon while going into the hills at night with flaming torches to round up cattle. The bamboo torches attracted showers of birds, which the Jaintias regarded as a "god-sent gift."

Experts say that up to 50 species of birds get killed, including the Tiger Bittern, Black Bittern, Little Egret, Pond Heron, Indian Pitta and Kingfishers. The experts however say the birds do not commit suicide but are killed by villagers under circumstances not yet fully explained.

"The birds get caught in the fog, get disoriented at their roost by the very high velocity of wind. It is highly probable that the birds come towards the light sources set up by the villagers for refuge and in the process get killed or captured," said Anwaruddin Choudhury, author of "The Birds of Assam." "However, the entire phenomenon still continues to be a mystery, but it is a fallacy that birds commit suicide in Jatinga," he told AFP.

Local people are beginning to become aware of the need to conserve the bird population, experts say.

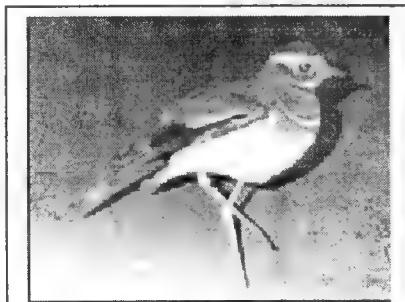
"We must create awareness about the danger of the entire bird species getting wiped out if the villagers continue enticing birds with torch flames and then eating the flesh," said H.C. Khersa, a teacher at Jatinga.

Most of the 2,000 villagers at Jatinga are farmers growing citrus fruits, mainly oranges.

'Voice box' to track Indian bird

The technology that gives cuddly toys their life-like sounds is being used to locate one of the world's rarest birds.

The Jerdon's courser lives in a tiny area of Andhra Pradesh in India and is seen so infrequently that hardly anything is known about its behaviour.



But now the UK's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has had noise boxes made up that mimic the animal's call.

Hundreds of park rangers will be given a box and a photograph and asked to report any sightings to ornithologists.

At night

A recording of the Jerdon's courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*) - the only one in existence - was made by Simon Wootton during a five-week field trip in one of the remotest parts of India.

"We had to see the bird and hear it at the same time to make sure we had the right call," he told BBC News Online.

"We saw it for about a second. Luckily, it called in flight, so we knew it was the right call." Wootton's group tried to track the bird, but lost it almost as quickly as they found it.

The courser was first identified by Dr Jerdon, a surgeon who travelled and wrote extensively about Indian wildlife in the middle of the 19th Century.

There have only ever been a handful of sightings. Indeed, so little is known about the bird that it was thought to be extinct for 80 years.

Then, one of the many teams that went to Andhra Pradesh to look for it discovered the animal was nocturnal.

Kew idea

Dr Rhys Green, an RSPB zoologist, was trying to find a novel way to increase awareness about the courser in India when an idea came to him while wandering around a gift shop in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London.

He came across a cuddly toy which makes a lifelike bird sound. "If we could take the box that makes the sound out and reprogramme it with the sound of the courser, we could use it as an educational tool," he said.

He asked the manufacturers if they could re-work the "voice box" to incorporate the Jerdon's call, and now the little devices, packaged up with a photo of the bird, are on their way to Andhra Pradesh.

It is hoped the boxes will help conservationists track the courser, thus discovering more about one of the world's most elusive birds.

By Sarah Mukherjee

BIRD OF THE MONTH

Pied Crested Cuckoo (*Clamator jacobinus*)

The **Pied Crested Cuckoo** (*Clamator jacobinus*) is a common woodland migrant bird and is generally met with in gardens and orchards within the city limits itself. Though they are more at home in wooded areas, they do tend to stray into large gardens where there are shady trees. Their distinctive call is more noticeable than the birds themselves.

The Pied Crested Cuckoo is often associated with the coming of the rains. There is the certainty that a sighting of this bird generally means that the rains are imminent, if they have not arrived already. Members of the BSAP are aware that, within 21 days of the first sighting of this bird, the monsoon will break. Whether the vagaries of the weather these days still allow the bird to function as so reliable a pointer remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that it is still a fair indicator of the coming of the monsoons. This function makes the sighting of this bird always very pleasant.



With their distinctive black-and-white plumage, which gives the birds their common name, the bird is quite unmistakable as far as their identification is concerned. The perky crest and the pied plumage gives away this pigeon-sized (though slimmer) bird. In the monsoons, the bird is quite spread out as far as its range is concerned. They spread throughout the Indian sub-continent and are met with in the hills of the ghats as well as in the plains. They are known to be brood parasitic on the Babbler family and are generally found in numbers in those areas where the Babblers are known to nest. There are also records of their offspring having been found in the nests of Wren-warblers; though how they are able to fit into these tiny nests is a wonder.

The birds seen in Southern India are thought to be members of the Southern African race (where the species is known as the Jacobin Cuckoo). Loss of habitat is causing some problems in the populations of these birds. There are fewer being noted now than were seen in earlier years. What the exact problem is, is not yet clear. These birds are sometimes seen in the cages of the bird markets, so it is certain that there is a small trade in them. How much this is causing the population decline needs to be studied.

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I, Aasheesh Pittie, hereby declare that the particulars given above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Hyderabad, 26 February 2004

Sd. Aasheesh Pittie (Signature of Publisher)

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Field Outings.

Sunday, 23-x-2005: Narsapur Reserve Forest, Medak District

Route Balanagar – Dundigal Airforce Base. Meet near the temple on the side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 – 7.30 a.m. There should be some woodland migrants around now. Narsapur is rich in woodpeckers and these should be added attractions. Both species of Chloropsis and possibly Spangled Drongo. Added attractions here are the Brown Fish Owls that are sometimes seen near the lake. The lake also almost always has a flock of Indian River Terns. There may also be some ducks, such as Pintails and Common Teal around. This will be a full-day trip. Carry water and packed lunches. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

NEWS & NOTES

FIELD TRIP TO ROURIYAL TANK (25th September 2005) – Happenings of the Society

By Humayun Taher

Never would I have believed that a slight shower of rain would have the effect of quelling the ardour of the avid twitcher. The age of birdwatching seems to be dying out! One wonders where those hardy souls are, that ventured forth armed with mackintoshes and plastic bags carefully draped over their binoculars, to peer excitedly at little birds, dimly visible through the drizzle. Yet, to my unbounded amazement, this is exactly what did not happen.

Reaching Punjagutta cross-roads well before the scheduled kick-off at 6.30, my father and myself waited... and waited... and waited some more. Finally, we decided that either we have chosen the wrong date, or that something is the matter. A couple of phone calls elicited the information that most of the members who were supposed to turn up had turned down because it was apparently raining. I grant that there was a slight drizzle, but surely not enough to warrant the cancellation of the trip.

Nothing daunted, we decided that if the rest of the members are not forthcoming, we will go ourselves. Shafaat Ulla Saab decided to accompany us, and the three of us set out at

around 7.30 or so. Strangely enough, almost as soon as we started, the rain slacked and eventually stopped and, by the time we reached Rouriyal, the sun was back in action and shining strong.

Reaching the waterbody was rather saddening as there was hardly any water there at all. A couple of shallow puddles was all that remained of the once-full lake where we had even seen Barheaded Geese in the days of long-ago. And of waterbirds there was not a sign. The only ones we could see were a couple of Black Ibis, a few Little Cormorants and Pond Herons. In the fields nearby, we saw several Cattle Egrets, but I doubt if these can be included in true waterbirds category.



Having parked the car near the bund, we started to walk along it to see what transpired. There was a herd of cattle in the fields adjoining the lake and, in attendance on these, we saw several Cattle Egrets and a few Common Mynas. Peering at the Mynas through the binoculars, we were able to spot a pair of Pied Starlings also feeding on the ground. This was interesting because even though it is apparent that Pied Starlings have moved into the Hyderabad region, they are still not birds that

are met with everyday. So we stood there and exclaimed over the birds which nonchalantly continued their feeding.

Continuing along the bund, we notched up a few Redvented Bulbuls, Whiteheaded Babblers and Roseringed Parakeets. A family of Mynas alighted on an electricity pole nearby and the antics of the stubby-tailed youngster brought a smile to the lips as it sat there, teetering gently in the breeze, seemingly almost on the point of falling but never quite getting there. Further up, we encountered other small birds of the bushlands. Ashy Wren Warblers were sporting in the bushes, accompanied by Tailor Birds, singing raucously in the bushes. There were also a few other little chaps around, but I am hopeless at identifying these LBJ's and prefer to put them down in the list just as LBJ's and have done with it! Sorting out the length of the third primary feather and the thickness of the beaks is not for me – and I have no hesitation in admitting it.

Swallows and Swifts sported in the air. One of the Common Swallows flew so close that we were able to see a small loose feather in the snowy-white shirt front! The spotless white plumage would have made a detergent manufacturer weep with joy!

Further up there was a surprise. We were watching a half-dozen or so Redwattled Lapwings running around in the fields when a large wader appeared. It alighted at the water's edge but was immediately set upon by a nearby Pond Heron. Taking fright at this attack, the wader swerved off and landed on a small patch of unattended shallow water. He immediately proceeded to wade around in the water which, at times, came almost up to his belly, so that he gave a very curious impression of actually swimming. We peered at the chap through the binoculars and hotly contested identity. At times it appeared as something and at times as something else. The problem was that we were only carrying Collins pictorial guide with us. The other books were in the car, which was now quite some distance away. So we noted as many of the features as we could and then legged it back to the car to establish identity. Based on the notes and plumage, we identified the chap as a Bartailed Godwit. I understand that this species is not found in the region so this becomes a notable sighting.

Near the car, a trio of Indian Rollers was disporting in the air. Mindful of the fact that European Rollers are also sometimes to be seen in Hyderabad, we took a close look, but the birds were obviously Indian Rollers. A Black Drongo nearby watched these antics disapprovingly. An Iora called and Green Bee-eaters flashed around. A Pied Bush Chat put in an appearance, along with a couple of Indian Robins – causing some confusion. We were speculating on the absence of Shrikes when a Brown Shrike appeared; silencing our complaints.

Eventually, we decided to start back. Hot chicken patties and cool water and then into the car, headed for the village, where we hoped to find a *chaiwallah*. We were not disappointed in this and we found a chap who specialised not only in *chai*, but also in hot *mirchis*. Much refreshed, we headed back, being stopped en-route by a soaring Blackheaded Snake Eagle (Short-toed Eagle to the old timers...). Further up, we heard Painted Partridge calling. And that set the seal on the end. Not a great day's birding, but a wonderful day in the bush. If only

more people realized that weather is no deterrent to birding. In fact, rainy days bring out the best – and that itself is a great incentive not to miss a rainy day's birding.

**ANNUAL GENERAL BODY MEETING OF THE SOCIETY:
Held on 22nd August 2005, at Vidyaranya School, Hyderabad**

Members of the Society assembled at the Vidyaranya School at 6.00 p.m. Even at 6.30 p.m. the Quorum of members was not present so the meeting had to be adjourned under rule 26 of the Rules and Regulations of the Society. The meeting was again called to order after 15 minutes and, as per the rules, whatever the number of members present would constitute a proper Quorum.

The President gave his annual report of the work of the Society and also projected the future course of action that the Society and its members need to formulate to wake the society from its slumbers and to put it back on the rails. All the activities of the society, field trips, indoor meetings, lectures and slide shows seemed to have become individual efforts rather than member activities. As you can see, this month there is no indoor meeting and till such time as proper programmes can be planned and organised, the activities of the society would continue to decline. It is indeed sad to think that more than 25 years after its inception, the BSAP is still struggling with everything; whether it is organising field trips or indoor meetings or printing its newsletter PITTA, or the Journal MAYURA. If it goes on like this, there will not be much to write about or to do, and all the recognition and acclaim that the society has attained, and the real work put in, thanks to its hardworking, motivated and dedicated members would be in vain. It is a sad reflection that even for its AGM, a proper quorum was not present.

The meeting proper started and the society accepted with regret the resignation of four of its senior and active members. While Aasheesh Pittie, Raajeev Mathew and S. Ashok Kumar gave personal difficulties as the reason to continue as Executive Committee members, Kiran K. had left for the U.K. and was thus unable to serve on the EC. Four members were proposed for the E.C. and duly elected. They are C. Bhaskar Rao, Nand Kumar, Sheetal Vyas and Humayun Taher.

The Hon. Secretary gave a brief report and also the Hon. Treasurer presented the accounts. The meeting ended with thanks to Mr. Ram Babu, Vidyaranya School, the Auditors Gandhi and Gandhi, AP Forest Department and other project sponsors. The Auditors Gandhi and Gandhi have been again appointed for a further period of 2 years.

Project: The members were apprised of the ongoing Telugu translation work given to the society, for translating the book BIRDS OF SOUTHERN INDIA, by Grimmett, R; Inskip, C and Inskip, T. The work is almost over and the manuscripts have to be put on CD and sent for final printing.

The Executive Committee again met at the house of Susheel Kapadia on 2.10.2005. The following office bearers have been elected:

1) Siraj A. Taher	President
2) M. Shafaat Ulla	Vice-President
3) C. Bhaskar Rao	Hon. Secretary
4) Susheel Kapadia	Hon. Treasurer

Sheetal Vyas was proposed for handling the programmes of the society in the media and she accepted this and agreed to do the work. Nand Kumar, M.S. Kulkarni and J.V.D. Moorty would look after the procuring of funds for society projects. Siraj A. Taher agreed to take up the matter of arranging for Indoor Meetings as and when they are planned.

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

I'm not quite sure if the species that I propose to discuss in this episode can qualify for an urban species. However, since the name of the bird is suggestive of such, perhaps I can be excused for taking it as an urban species. Besides, I happen to have seen a small flock the other day, hawking insects quite happily in the late evenings, in the vicinity of the office. So we will devote this month to the study of that interesting bird, the House Swift.

These are most entertaining birds. In appearance, they resemble little bows, complete with arrows fitted! And their tiny beaks are forever questing for midges, flies and other assorted insect life. All day, they are on the wing, in quest of various delicacies that would appeal to the gourmet House Swift. And now that they seem to have moved into the city, they appear to have a still greater variety in their diet. One disadvantage of this is, of course, that they have to put up with a considerable amount of pollution. But they are willing to put up with it for the advantage of the variety in their diet.

The bill of these birds is a perfect apology, but their gape is very wide. It has to be, as they prefer to do most of their eating in the air. Such a habit, if performed by one with a small gape, would cause onlookers to raise their eyebrows at the appalling table manners. The House Swift solves the problem by maintaining a gape of considerable size and this appendage helps it to swallow its food in full flight without scandalizing onlookers with its table manners.

Not only is the bird very compact looking, it's home too is cozy. They build under balconies and in small nooks and corners of old buildings. The nest is composed almost entirely of small feathers and straw and is held in place with the birds' saliva. The entrance is constructed between the wall and the nest cup. Here the birds line their home with soft down and raise a brood of huge gaped, ever-hungry chicks. How the parents manage to find enough time during the day to satisfy the appetite of their ever-hungry offspring is a mystery to me. But they seem to do it with remarkable aplomb.

I remember in the days of long ago, when I was much younger than I am now, a House Swift was brought to the house. I cannot now recollect how it got here, but the problem with it was a broken wing. For a bird that survives entirely in a state of flight, this was a quite serious injury. Swifts spend almost the entire day on the wing, so the loss of one wing almost certainly means death for the bird. With us, perhaps it would have a chance of survival.

The first problem that presented itself was where to keep the bird. A Swift's feet are very strangely constructed. All four toes point forward. So the bird is incapable of perching in the true sense. We solved this problem by getting a cane-backed chair. Placing the bird on it, we found that it would cling to the cane webbing quite easily and, in this rather strange posture, it preferred to live. So that solved the problem of lodging. The boarding, however, was also a matter of some interest. How to feed it...? And what to feed it? Flies suggested themselves – there was a sugarcane juice vendor near the house and the crushed stalks of sugarcane attracted hundreds of flies. I invested in a couple of flyswats and made hourly visits to the sugarcane stall, where I swatted several dozen flies, much I may add, to the amusement of the vendor and his several customers, and carried them back in a small tin box and, with the aid of a pair of small tweezers, fed them to the bird, as it hung on the back of the chair. The bird eventually managed to get over its broken wing, but before we could find out if it would make a successful return to the wild, a cat had a very conclusive interview with it.

Since Swifts have very special feet, with all their four toes pointed forward, they cannot perch and they are therefore forced to hang from edges. Consequently, you will never see them perched on telegraph lines as do their cousins, the Swallows. This lends a certain amount of ungainliness to their appearance when at rest. But see the same bird on the wing, and you will never believe that it is the same chap that was hanging so precariously from the edge of the nest. In the air, a Swift is just that – swift and most elegant. They simply swim through the air!

Perhaps the major enemy of these birds is the Hobby. Other predators simply do not have the speed necessary to catch these birds, though they sometimes put in a few vain attempts. Having said that, there is a record of a Kestrel having caught a House Swift once. I wasn't there when this happened, but the incident was reported in a British birding magazine which, I regret to report, I seem to have mislaid and now I cannot even recall the name of the excellent journal. But generally speaking, even the Hobby has its work cut out in trying to catch one of these birds for its dinner. The Swifts are fast birds and are quite capable of outflying even this, the swiftest of the falcons.

There was a time when the nests of these birds were collected, to supply the Chinese kitchens with the ingredients for birds' nest soup. Chinese seem to specialise in delicacies that bring the natural world into grave danger! Be that as it

may, there is a species known as the Edible Swiftlet, whose nest is composed almost entirely of the saliva of the bird, and this is the most sought after ingredient for the soup. But in the absence of the nest of the Edible Swiftlet, other species' nests are equally eagerly sought. So the House Swift also suffered in this sort of poaching. The nests were collected with little regard for whether they supported young or not. Doubtless, if the nests contained young, the poachers would have found a use for them also of a culinary nature!

Even so, with all these dangers surrounding it, the Swifts go through life, twittering happily as they hawk the midges and moths that form their bill of fare. And if you have the time and the inclination, it is worth spending a few minutes watching their antics in the air. Keep watching the House Swift. Until next month - Happy Birding!!

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE KESTREL (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Kthe Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) is the commonest of our falcons and, in the proper season, is seen in quite sizeable numbers in its chosen habitat of open country, with scattered trees and scrub. Also inhabits fields and grasslands. Here it hunts for locusts, field mice and lizards and the occasional small sickly or wounded bird.

Members of the BSAP have been doing some bird ringing of these birds for some years now. Although no reports have come in of recoveries from outside, there have been several of these birds ringed in the course of the three years in which the studies were conducted.

Several specimens of this bird have been kept in captivity from time-to-time and they are found to be a confiding species which rapidly lose their fear of man. Some of these captive specimens were trained to hunt and they proved to be fairly good at it, though the size of their prey was necessarily in keeping with their own small size. An interesting aspect is that none of the trained birds ever hunted by their normal wild method of hovering. Hovering appears to be a prerogative of only the wild birds. This hovering flight is very interesting to watch, as the bird is often seen almost suspended in one spot, only the tips of its wings rapidly beating.

A subspecies of this bird, the Indian Kestrel is supposed to be a resident of Southern India and Sri Lanka. However, there is no record of this race being seen in the Hyderabad region.

Loss of habitat is a prime reason for the decline of the species. Earlier, there used to be seen quantities of these birds in the Jubilee Hills area, but with the wholesale destruction of the rocks and scrub area which was the preferred habitat, the birds have declined significantly and now it is a very rare sight to see a Kestrel in areas where, but a few years ago, it was found in impressive numbers. Protection of the habitat is vital to the survival of these visitors to our shores. Another source of danger is the activities of trappers. There is a good market for birds of the hawk tribe, here in Hyderabad as we are often visited by Arab sheiks who value these birds for falconry. Even though the Kestrel is generally not used for serious falconry, yet it is a falcon and, as such, can be used for the purpose. Therefore, there is a market for them and, in the season, quite a few are to be seen in the cages of the bird market, where they command quite a fair price. This, coupled with the loss of their habitat and the scarcity of food, is making these birds much more uncommon than they once used to be. It is high time that people woke up to the fact that these birds are in grave danger, and try and do something about it.



The BSAP is planning to organise a field camp for five days to Dehra Dun via New Delhi, in the month of December. All interested members are requested to please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla on Tel.: (040) 2335 3098

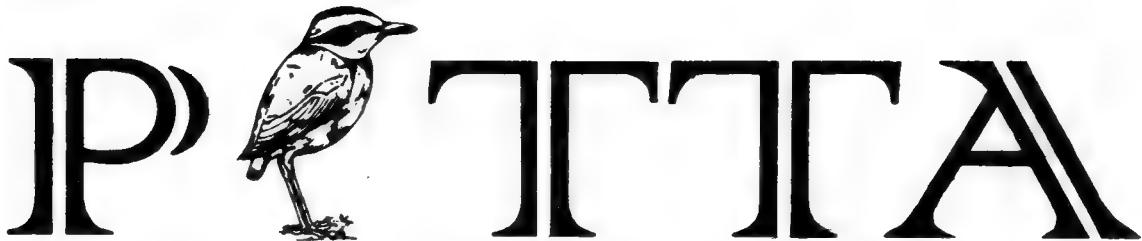
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Field Outings

Sunday, 14-viii-2005: Chilkur Deer Park, Hyderabad

Route: Mehdipatnam: Langar House: A P Police Academy. Meet at the venue by 6.45 a.m. This will be a half-day trip. Chilkur is very rich in small woodland birds. There should be lots of warblers and some flycatchers around as well. For those who love those LBJ's, it's absolute paradise! The youngsters will have lots of Chital to look at – maybe the odd Sambar will also appear. The Orioles near the EEC should have their youngsters hatched and out of the nest by now. Similarly also the Spotted Munia that nests right at the entrance of the EEC. Keep an eye open for snakes – there should be quite a few Checkered Keelbacks near the ponds, and Vine Snakes in the bushes.

Members willing to take/offer other members lift in their vehicles please contact Mr. Shafaat Ulla.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 22-viii-2005: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Annual General Meeting of the Society. Please refer to notice given below.

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

NEWS & NOTES

A CLOSE ENCOUNTER OF THE BIRD KIND

By Sharada Annamaraju

This is with reference to the article on the Pariah Kite, published in the Society's bulletin – Pitta in May 2005, by the City BirdBrain, in the column Urban Birding. The author mentions an incident between a fishmonger and a kite, where the kite makes off with a few fish and the fishmonger is left fuming. The author goes on to mention in the third paragraph, that youngsters would be warned against carrying foodstuff out in the open, as there was the possibility of kites swooping in on the children and carrying the food away. Now, I would like to share an incident that took place when I was 6 years old (Year 1992, place Vishakapatnam), and was studying in the first standard. I remember the incident vividly as that was a pretty scary encounter of the bird kind.

Everyday around our school lunch hour, the Black Kites would be there, sailing around in the skies above the school grounds.

We wouldn't notice them at other times of the day. But during the lunch hour, there would be quite a lot of them, some feeding on the morsels of food dropped carelessly by us school children on the ground. One such lunch hour my friends and me were lunching near our classroom in the shade of the porch. My mother had packed a single jam sandwich for me. I walked out with it from under the shade out onto the school ground, not heeding my friends' warnings of not eating out in the open, for there were the kites outside. I stood looking around the ground and had not yet bitten into the sandwich. All of a sudden my friends screamed out from behind me "Cheel!". I didn't know what cheel meant and I still wasn't worried about their screams "Cheel, Sharada, Cheel...!" I looked back nonchalantly to enquire the reason for their yells and suddenly felt a tug at my sandwich. The girls screamed a final "Cheel!" I turned my head towards the sandwich and saw claws gripping it! I felt the flow of air created by the Cheel's wings beating down. I took one look at the cheel's brown head, yelled, let go of the sandwich and leapt back to the safety of the porch. The bird started flying away with the sandwich. It had probably not managed to grip it properly, or

maybe the bread slices were too brittle and may have broken, for my sandwich flopped back onto the earth soon after. The act of the Kite swooping on me and carrying away my lunch happened in a matter of seconds. But they were enough for me to note the sharp talons, the hooked beak and the eyes looking at me. My thumb next to its claws on the sandwich, looked very small and the bird seemed to be as big as me!

Happily, I didn't go hungry that day, for my friends shared their tasty lunch with me! Munching hungrily on a piece of *roti*, I saw another kite swooping down on another kids' lunch, much to that girl's horror! Thereafter, I would often see similar incidents happening to other children, but they must have been taking place earlier too, though I was unaware then. After that day, I learnt not to take my lunch out into the open anymore. And I also learnt what a "Cheel" is.

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

From birds of the night to those that are amongst the first to wake up in the mornings. We will devote this month's column to that rather interesting bird – the Redvented Bulbul. And though I seem to hear my public say, "What's so interesting about this bird!", I maintain that there is much that is interesting about this species. They may be one of the 'most common birds to be seen in urban gardens, but a close look will reveal some extremely interesting features about their behaviour and their habits.

The Redvented Bulbul, though not possessed of the dazzling plumage of the Iora or the Golden Oriole, nevertheless manages to give quite a few other species a run for their money in the matter of natty dressing. Though this column is not supposed to be a plumage describer, still I will say that their appearance is not at all displeasing to the eyes. And talking about eyes, the rather roguish glint in the eyes of the bulbuls is a sure pointer to their mischievous habits. They seem to take a positive delight in harrying other unfortunates. I have seen a pair of Bulbuls put a myna to flight – and believe me, that takes some doing.

I remember a pair of Bulbuls that had taken it into their head to build a rather neat little nest in the midst of some creeper that grew just outside the verandah of our old house. This was in the days of long ago, when we still lived in independent houses instead of apartment blocks. Anyway, there they built their nest and, in due course of time, eggs were laid and three young bulbuls arrived into this world. Never were hungrier birds – that pink mouth continued to gape throughout the day. And no matter how many times daddy or mummy brought in some delicacy and stuffed it into their gaping maws, they always seemed to have space for just some more. I remember that one of the adults took to trying out some scrambled eggs as substitute for insects for the young ones. This diet seemed not to the liking of the youngsters and the adult soon quit trying. Strong-willed were the youngsters, even at that age.

And then something happened – one day, going out to check the progress of the young, I was spotted by an adult. Immediately, loud shrieks echoed around the garden and, to our utter amazement, the adult immediately proceeded to indulge in what is known as the "broken wing display". In ornithological parlance, a broken wing display is when an adult bird pretends to have an injury and, hopping along the ground with its wings dragging, manages to convince predators that it is easy prey. The predator, taken in by this display, abandons

its plans of robbing nests and immediately pursues the acting adult, in the hope of picking up an easy meal. The adult leads the predator away from the nest, still playing hurt and then, when it is convinced that the predator is far enough away from the nest, the actor takes wing and flies off – leaving the predator frustrated and hungry. What was interesting about the bulbul's display was that, looking in the books, we were unable to find any reference to Redvented Bulbuls performing this display. It seemed to be more the prerogative of ground nesting birds like partridge, quail and waders. However, here was the bulbul performing the same act. Surely, this is one place where we go one up on Dr. Salim Ali, we thought. But that eminent gentleman was not one to be so easily beaten. Looking up the general habits of Redwhiskered Bulbuls, we found this display ascribed to it and, to our chagrin, also "The Redventer" Bulbul is also known to perform... this display..."

A single bird has started to visit the buffet tray in the balcony these days. It appreciates the bits of fruit that are generally to be found on the tray, when the Mynas manage to overlook them. At one point, it arrived on the scene before the Mynas and immediately proceeded to wolf down the choicest pieces. Then the Mynas arrived and trouble began – with the two contestants sparring around each other, looking for an opening with which to open hostilities. The Myna saw a couple more of its kin land on the railing and apparently decided that this would be a good time to open negotiations. But the Bulbul was more than a match for the larger opponent. It fought wisely and well and, so pugnacious was he that he easily put the larger bird to flight in a short while.

Observing these proceedings from the window, I was reminded that the old man once mentioned that these birds were sometimes used as fighting birds – pocket editions of the fighting cockerels of yesteryears. Apparently large sums of money were invested and lost over these birds. One wonders at the fact that, if the fighting cockerel fared badly, he could at least be put to use in the cooking pot – but what does one do with a bulbul that has fought not too well. Interesting question – because nothing I have heard or read of these birds has shown that they may make good eating.

The Redvented Bulbul is completely at home in your garden, and also in the deepest forest. I have seen this species feeding on wild berries in the hills of Mahabaleshwar. And on the same note, I have this chap sitting in the balcony on the food tray and chattering angrily at me for not providing more fruit for

his consumption. Whatever he does, he does well and enjoys it.

So this month, keep the eyes peeled for the Redvented Bulbuls and, even if you do not see them performing the Broken Wing

display, there will be plenty of other things that they will do which will be of equal interest. Keep watching the bulbuls this month. Until next time – Happy Birding!

SPOTLIGHT

By Siraj A. Taher

The Jerdon's Courser (*Rhinoptilus bitorquatus*)

A young medical doctor attached to the East India Company was based in Nellore, in the then state of Madras/Mysore. He was fond of roaming in the plains and hills of the area and the surrounding districts. His name was Trevor Cavell Jerdon. One such outing in 1848 created history and immortalised the medico. Jerdon procured and recovered for science, a bird then named by E. Blyth as *Macrotarsius bitorquatus*, and named it after the man who first found it in the "hilly country above the Eastern Ghats by Nellore and Cuddapah", as the Jerdon's or Double-banded Courser. Subsequently the bird was recorded by W.T. Blanford from Sironcha on the banks of the Godavari river bordering Adilabad District, and near Bhadrachalam in Khammam District, in 1871. The last historical record of that period, is from Anantapur District in 1900, by Howard Campbell.

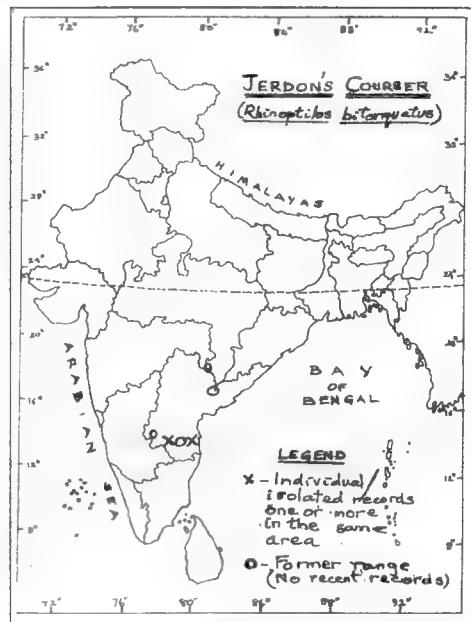
The Jerdon's or Double-banded Courser went through several scientific name changes from *Rhinoptilus* to *Cursorius* and then back to *Rhinoptilus*, creating quite a lot of doubt in the minds of taxonomists as to the true habits and behaviour of the bird. Jerdon's description of the Courser's habitat was very sketchy and there was not very much to fall back upon from the records of either Blanford or Campbell.

Concerted efforts from time to time included the Hyderabad State Ornithological Survey and the Vernay Survey of the Eastern Ghats. Neither procured any more specimens, or could add to the knowledge of the birds' habitat or behaviour.

With very little information in the true natural habitat or behaviour of this Courser, and a restricted area to search for, the scientists and all others looking for it were running into a blank wall for almost eighty years. It was only when the bird was assumed to be possibly related to the *Rhinoptilus* species of Southern Africa, a name which it carried in the 1930's, both by J.L. Peters (1943) and later by Howard Moore (1980), that some headway was made.

The three races of *Rhinoptilus* in Africa were all nocturnal birds, so there was a strong possibility that the Jerdon's Courser also may well be a nocturnal bird. And so it proved to be, when finally the bird was procured from Reddipalli village in Cuddapah District, on the 15th of January 1986. Voila! The bird had been found! Dr. Bharat Bhushan, who was working as a Field Naturalist for the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) on their Endangered Species Project, along with the late Dr. Salim Ali as the Principal Investigator, was the person who managed to find the Jerdon's Double-banded Courser with the help of local Yanadi tribal bird trappers. One of these trappers, himself a

nocturnal shikari, called Aitanna even confirmed the bird's nocturnal behaviour. Finally, it was this same man who actually trapped the bird. Even the local names had changed from Adavi Utta-Titti (Jungle Lapwing / Stammerer), possibly a description of the call; to the present telugu name Kalivi Kodi (Kalivi = *Carissa* bush, Kodi = hen), as it was basically found amidst the thorny *Carissa* bushes, which abounded in its habitat, along with *Acacia* and *Zizyphus*. The first bird, which subsequently died, is now a prized specimen at the BNHS museum.



The Jerdon's Courser is a bird of dry scrub jungle, now known to be nocturnal, seen either solitary or in pairs. It is not very vocal, having an almost plaintive cry "be...be...be...be...bebe". It is exclusively endemic to the southern region of the Indian sub-continent, Andhra Pradesh to be particular. It is scarce, or extremely rare. Recent isolated records of this bird are from small areas of Kadapa District of Andhra Pradesh, while stray records of its former range were from the districts of Anantapur, Nellore, Khammam and Adilabad, (Sironcha, now in Madhya Pradesh).

Studies have been undertaken by the BNHS under a project sponsored by the Darwin Institute, U.K. and some encouraging results have been obtained by the study teams. Very recently permission has been granted by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department and the Department of

Environment, Government of India to use a radio chip for more advanced studies to determine the birds' numbers, behaviour, movements and nesting.

The Jerdon's Courser is a typical brown-coloured courser, but with huge eyes, with a broad supercilium, short yellow bill with

black tip and striking brown and white double bands across the breast. Only extensive field studies may show whether the birds in the Lankamalleswara wildlife sanctuary, or any other area nearby, have viable populations or whether we have only succeeded in temporarily halting the march of these birds into oblivion.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE ROSY PASTOR (*Sturnus roseus*)

The Rosy Pastor (*Sturnus roseus*) is a rosy pink myna-like bird with a black head and crown, neck and upper breast. The wings and the tail are also black. The birds arrive in large flocks during the winter, when they are abundant in the North-Western portions of the country and the Deccan. In the Hyderabad region, large flocks are seen in thinly cultivated areas and scrub jungle.

This bird is one of the earliest of our winter visitors. The flocks begin to sweep in around the end of July, so there should be some around now. They stay with us almost upto April; quite obviously they do not like the dry heat of the Deccan.

These birds used to be seen in abundance in Vanasthalipuram deer park, when the Palas trees are in bloom. They appeared to have a fancy for the flowers of the Flame-of-the-forest trees and could be generally seen all over the trees, hungrily sucking the nectar from the bright red blooms. They are beneficial to farmers as locusts form a large part of their diet – though they are also known to do considerable damage in the *jowar* fields. A large flock, at work on the Palas trees is a wonderful sight, with the rosy pink and black plumage of the birds showing up in vivid contrast to the bright orange-red blooms of the Palas flowers.

These birds are not so common now as they once used to be. The numbers appear to have dwindled now and those flocks of 500 or more birds that were once so much a feature to the Vanasthalipuram deer park have now dwindled to no more than about 50 or 60 at the best of times. Doubtless, the destruction of the habitat and the subsequent persecution has reduced the species throughout much of its erstwhile range. Protection is needed, and needed urgently, to ensure the continued survival of these beautiful birds and to bring the flocks back in again.

2nd AGM Notice Dated 01 August 2005

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held on **Monday 22nd August 2005**. All members are urged to ensure that their membership fees is paid up for the current year, failing which they would be ineligible to attend the proceedings.

The agenda of the AGM would be:

- 1) President's Report
- 2) Secretary's Report
- 3) Treasurer's Report
- 4) Appointment of Auditors
- 5) Elections of Office Bearers (please see above)
- 6) Election of Executive Committee Members (Members desirous of serving on the committee, please give their names to the Hon. Secretary)
- 7) Any other Business'

Please treat this as official intimation of the Annual General Meeting and ensure that you are eligible and available to attend the same.

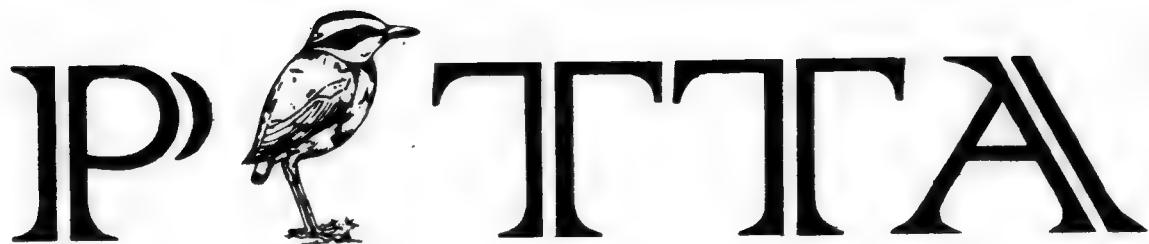
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Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

Field Outings

Sunday, 25-ix-2005: Rouriyal Tank, Rangareddi District

Route Charminar - Barkas - Pahadi Shareef. After 12 - 13 km., take the first left turn after Pahadi Shareef and drive on for 5 km. to the tank, which is on the right hand side of the road. Members are requested to reach the destination by 7.15 - 7.30 a.m. There should be lots of migrants around at this time of the year, with the waterfowl already in in impressive numbers. Added attractions here are the Crested Honey Buzzards that are always to be seen in the area, and used to nest in a large tree near the tank. There are sure to be some ducks, such as Pintails and Widgeons around, maybe even a few Barheaded Geese. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 19-ix-2005; 6.30 p.m.: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Audio-visual presentation on Bird flights and Aircrafts by Dr. Narasimhachari, Retd. Professor of Zoology; Kakatiya University.

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

NEWS & NOTES

FIELD TRIP TO CHILKUR DEER PARK (14th August 2005) – Happenings of the Society

By Arjun Surendra

Our arrival at the park gate, was heralded by two Grey Partridges (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), which gave us a fly past salute. On closer inspection of the gate we found, much to our chagrin, that it was locked. We did however, manage to spot the watchman lazing about on his chair. After rendering ourselves hoarse, we were able to attract his attention and rouse him out of his early morning reverie. Well, finally the gates were opened. The delay at the gate however, gave us an opportunity to do some birding. We managed to see a Tree pie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) and a Redvented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*). We parked the car and waited for the others to arrive. During this time we had a couple of interesting sightings. A Common Grey Hornbill (*Tockus birostris*) was spotted. One sighting puzzled us for a little while though, we saw a bird that was half hidden in the

grass. This turned out to be a Large Grey Babbler (*Turdoides malcolmi*).

The attendance was taken and there were twenty people present. We split into two groups and headed out with our respective guides. One of the first things we saw was a male Small Minivet (*Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*) perched atop a tree. The angle of the sun was just right to highlight the beautiful orange-crimson breast. It was joined by the female and they soon flew off together. A Franklin's Wren-Warbler (*Prinia hodgsonii*) was spotted. Some members of our party saw a herd of Spotted Deer. We were planning to head towards the watch tower when our guide got us lost, we climbed rocks to try and spot the tower, but the foliage was too thick. We then decided to retrace our steps and see if we could locate the elusive tower. We could hear a Redwattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) and finally we did manage to see it. As we were walking toward a small pond we saw two birds fly past. One of them was a Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and the other a Small Pratincole. Further ahead, at another largish pond we saw a pair of Spotbill Ducks (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)

that took off on seeing us. Suddenly we spotted the watchtower right behind the pond. Heaving a sigh of relief we set off toward it. En route we managed to spot a Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) and a female Purple Sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*). Finally having reached the tower, we took a much needed break. The watch tower provided us with an excellent view of the park. Here we met up with the other group and exchanged notes. Their sightings included a Thickbilled Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum agile*), Tickell's Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*), Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), a Fantail Flycatcher, Purplerumped Sunbird (*Nectarinia Zeylonica*)

Refreshed by our break, we decided to head back. On our way back, while we were walking on a bund, we spotted a Coppersmith (*Megalaima haemacephala*) high up on a tree, and a glimpse at another pair of Small Minivets. We also saw a Tickell's Flowerpecker. This area seemed rich in birdlife, next trip maybe one could just sit there for a bit and watch. Further on, an Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*) was also spotted.

All through our outing, many calls were heard. But the birds were hidden in the thick green cover and did not deem us worthy enough to grant us an audience.

A TRIP TO NAGARHOLE NATIONAL PARK

By Mrs. Gool R. Plumber

Nagarhole and Bandipur National Parks together cover a little over 1500 sq. km., of which Nagarhole covers 645 sq. km. Its official name is Rajiv Gandhi National Park. These two parks, along with Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu, and the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, form a contiguous wildlife habitat. The river Kabini flows through Nagarhole and, on the other side of the river, the Bandipur National Park is visible. The Kabini river subsequently joins the river Cauvery. Nagarhole, in the local language, means "Snake River", after which the Park is named. The jungle stretches between the Western Ghats on one side, and the lovely Nilgiri Hills on the other. They support a rich array of wildlife – from herds of Asiatic Elephants to the majestic Tiger.

My husband and I stayed for 3 nights (from 4th to 7th May), in the Kapila Resort. This resort is about 1 km. from the Kabini River Lodge. It is spread over a large area and has small colonial type bungalows which are well maintained. Our bungalow faced the Kabini River and had four spacious rooms – double rooms with covered verandah, overlooking the river. There are four such bungalows with a central open spacious restaurant for meals. The service is good and the staff is courteous and willing to give information. Most of the staff are young and, though Kannada is the most prevalent language, most of them, especially the jeep drivers, know English.

The manager, Mr. Vikram is a quiet, helpful person; well-versed in wildlife and has books and other material on nature. My husband, who is an avid reader preferred to spend his time on the verandah reading a fascinating book from Mr. Vikram's collection. He did not join the safaris except on the first evening. But he found much peace and harmony in nature, sitting on the verandah and reading, or walking along the river bank facing our bungalow.

The resort offers a good array of nourishing vegetarian food and the fresh air sharpened our appetites so that both of us enjoyed the food, relishing also the ambience of the place. During dinner, they had log fires burning and the pathways back to the bungalow were well lit with low, covered lights.

During our stay, we had three different families staying in the other wing of the bungalow and, on the last day, an American

software engineer stayed in the room next to us. These were the people along with me, who were taken on jeep safaris twice a day – in the morning from 6.30 a.m. to almost 9 a.m. and in the evening from 4 p.m. to about 6.45 p.m. The best part of our visit to Nagarhole were these safaris and I went six times during our stay. The drivers are young and have keen eyesight for spotting wildlife even from a long distance. They are also very familiar with the flora and know all the tracks, watch towers, and which are the best spots to see wildlife.

In the park, we saw giant Bamboo groves and for the first time, I saw such luxuriant growth of Bamboos. We saw teak in some areas of the forest and, within the precincts of the lodge, we saw young Sandalwood trees. As it was May, the trees were bare in some parts, but I could spot Indian Laburnums, Indian Coral Trees and Red Silk Cotton trees (they were already bare of blossoms). We also saw Lantana bushes along some of the pathways.

Coming to wildlife, we were thrilled to see herds of wild Elephants along the Kabini river bank in the evenings and during the morning safaris in the bamboo thickets. This was not an uncommon sight. Between Nagarhole and Bandipur forests, there are about 5000 elephants, and the forest provides them with grass, bamboo, waterholes and the river. Though we could not spot tiger or panther, the jeep attender and driver showed us clear pug marks of both these cats, which are naturally shy and secretive.

Two major herbivores seen were many small herds of Gaur and herds of Spotted Deer (Chital). Both these species were quite common. The Gaur are strong and muscular, but gentle and quiet animals. They were generally spotted along grass patches in the forest, and similar patches on the river banks. The bulls are darker than the cows, but their deep brown coat with the white socks make them very conspicuous. Chital are much commoner in these forests and I was amazed at the size of some of the herds we encountered.

There is a close relationship between Chital and Langur monkeys. We saw the monkeys on the lower branches of trees, giving warning calls to the deer on seeing our jeep, and the herd would quickly scamper away into the bushes. Amongst the animals, Langur are perhaps the most alert. It

was a delight to watch them swing through the trees with such grace; and they also provided many opportunities to observe their behaviour.

The other animals we spotted were small groups of wild boar and wild dogs. Mongoose and grey squirrels were often seen on the forest floor. Twice, our driver spotted Malabar Giant Squirrels high up in the forest canopy, and it was a wonderful sight, as we could not have spotted them on our own.

Nagarhole is also a paradise for birds and the following list of birds were seen on most of the safari trips:
Indian Roller; Hoopoe; Goldenbacked Woodpecker; Brainfever Bird; Myna; Peafowl; Jungle Fowl; Redwattled Lapwings; Cormorants; Little Egret; Large Egret; Kingfisher; Pond Heron; Black Ibis; Coucal; Snake Eagle; Large Pied Wagtail; Little Brown Dove; Fish Owl; Jungle Crow; Racquet-Tailed Drongo;

Babblers; Painted Stork; Black-rumped Flameback Woodpecker; Crested Hawk-Eagle (nest); Sparrows; Bee-eater; Sunbird; Baybacked Shrike; Indian Robin; Bulbul. Of these, the Indian Roller, Hoopoe and Mynas were common. On our morning safaris, the jungle resounded with bird calls and those of Langur and Peafowl. These were glorious moments and I thanked God for His creation and he staff, who have preserved these forests.

On the last day, we learnt that forest officers were involved in elephant counts in Nagarhole. There are seven watch towers near the waterholes and there are always two men there to keep a watch.

One thing we noticed was large logs of wood and plenty of dead trees along the tracks. (Is this a disturbing sign - Editor).

BIRDS OF A CITY PARK

By Siraj A. Taher

Situated along the main road in Banjara Hills, it was once a small, natural lake with a few houses surrounding it. During a better part of the year the water level was good. Marshes and reeds added to the charm of the lake, and migratory ducks, besides the regular resident species, occasionally frequented it. A stray fowler would not be averse to taking a shot at them during the season. As time passed, and small houses started coming up all over the surrounding areas, this wonderful scene changed and the lake became dry; and continued to be so for several years. Then, a few years back, a nice park was laid up here, with lawns, trees, of course a canteen and playing area for the children, with the lake as the centre of attraction. Of course, the marshes and reeds were there, but so was boating and cemented embankments.

For sometime, no water birds could be seen except some Pond Herons and a few Little Egrets. This year I happened to visit the park fairly regularly to take my grand-daughter to play there, and I beheld that the lake was abuzz with waterbirds - Coots, Waterhens, Egrets, Swallows and Swifts, Ducks (both domesticated and wild), and a few Geese.

I started to feed bread to the domestic ducks and geese and one day, a Coot swam down from a clump of reeds, picked up a few pieces of bread and frantically waded and half-flew back into the reeds. It came back a few minutes later for more food. I then realised it was carrying the bread back for its young amongst the reeds. Soon another Coot joined it, and my granddaughter and I were enjoying throwing pieces of bread to be picked up by the Coots. All this time, the feral ducks and geese were merrily feeding on the bread pieces thrown in the water, frequently chasing away the coots.

A few weeks later, the parent coots had five chicks following them. In mid-June I observed chicks of the Whitebreasted Waterhen and two parents showing the same behaviour; and two days later, a pair of Spotbill Ducks with a flotilla of seven chicks also came up to the water's edge for feeding with the other birds on the bread. All this was very delightful for me, but also very sad that these waterbirds could not find enough food for their young on the ponds. Will I see them next year also...?

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE INDIAN TAILOR BIRD (*Orthotomus sutorius*)

The **Tailor Bird** (*Orthotomus sutorius*) is a jaunty little olive green bird with white underparts, rusty crown and two elongated pinpointed feathers in the tail. They inhabit scrub country, near cultivation, gardens, wooded areas and deciduous jungle. They are found throughout the Indian subcontinent but are absent in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

This bird is a resident species and is familiar and confiding. It is equally at home in outlying scrub jungle as in gardens and shrubbery in the heart of a city. It is known to fearlessly enter verandahs of even occupied houses, hopping amongst the creepers and potted plants, within a few feet of the inmates, giving vent to its



loud cheerful trilling call. They are fond of tiny insects, their eggs and grubs and also have a partiality to flower nectar.

Five races are thought to occur in the subcontinent. All of them are adept in the sewing of leaves of trees to construct their very clever nests. Selecting some tree with large leaves, such as teak or wild almond, the birds will either fold over a single leaf and stitch it along the edges or, if not able to find trees with such large leaves, they are equally skilled in stitching together two or three leaves of other trees. The funnel is then lined with soft fibres, cotton and vegetable down, and the eggs are laid therein.

There is reason to suppose that these birds have suffered less in the current mass urbanisation. Since they are able to adapt to small gardens and scrub areas, the populations, though dwindling, are not very discouraging. The birds are seen nesting in areas such as the large municipal parks within the city, and also in shady gardens where such still exist. Still, it would be well to ensure that the population is indeed stable – some dedicated work is required to be done here to ensure that there is still a viable population left of these birds in the area.

MY FIRST BARN OWL

By Humayun Taher

There is something magical about working late in the nights, even if it be in the surrounds of the concrete jungle. Objects that are only too clear during the daylight hours take on ghostly shapes when viewed in those velvet hours between dusk and dawn. Even an object as innocuous as a dead cocoanut palm can look strangely eerie after dark. The proper habits of *Homo sapiens* are all related to the day. At night, without the sanctuary of bright lights, a human being is a mere apology. He is afraid, mortally afraid and powerless in the dark!

And yet, this magical time is utilised by other beings of this world. Who has not heard the eerie chatter of the Spotted Owlets from the nearby trees. Or the haunting boom of the Great Horned Owl often startles those more blessed with natural areas around their homes, as he sails through the night skies on his lawful business. If gifted with sharp hearing, the little squeaks of the pipistrelle as it hawks insects, reminds us that there are other mammals that also thrive in the nights.

Yet another denizen of the dark hours is the Barn Owl. And, a few days ago, in the heart of the city, just a stone's throw away from the Hyderabad International Airport, I was privileged to see one – a ghostly shadow in the darkness, a sudden flurry of wings in the night, and there alighted on a window ledge a veritable phantom of the night. It sat there, looking over its shoulder onto the busy street below; and then turned those huge eyes straight into mine. There were black pools of thought behind those eyes: If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then the soul of the Barn Owl is deep and awesome. There are illimitable jungles in those eyes, and the power and wisdom to bring them into the ken of the bird! I had a strange hypnotic feeling that the bird was not only able to see me, but was also able to read my thoughts much better than I could read his.

All this took much less time than it takes to tell. Whether, it disapproved of my stare, or whether it had business elsewhere, I

cannot tell; but the bird suddenly took off and vanished into the darkness from whence it had come. I caught a glimpse of the silhouette as it crossed the street, and then the dark swallowed up the phantom as though it had never been there at all. All I had, to remember it, was the memory of those brilliant golden eyes. And then I remembered something else also – that this was the very first time I had seen a wild Barn Owl. I have seen them in other places, it is true. Twice have I seen them in the cages in the bird market. On one occasion, in long ago days, there came two of these birds to the house, in a wire cage of rough manufacture – props for a horror movie, they were; and the producer, having no further use for these birds, brought them and handed them over to the then secretary of the BSAP. Malnourished, exhausted and plain terrified, one of the birds did not survive the night. The other was stronger, and he at least made it through the night – though I do not know if he made it to the end!

All I can think of is that, if more people were given the grace to stare into the eyes of an Owl, they would probably emerge from the encounter as better and stronger people, with more understanding of the world we share. Do I sound anthropomorphic – maybe... But blame it on the hypnotism of the owl's eyes. They make you think, believe me. Think about our place in the world – and the ridiculous inventions we make to ensure that the dark does not frighten us. And then still continue to be afraid to go and see why the lights are not working.

At the end, if I were given the grace to return to earth in a form of my choosing, I may well opt for an owl. No matter if people do call me "ullu"; at least I will have the opportunity to get to know better those velvet hours between twilight and dawn, that are denied to the human intruder!

For Private Circulation Only

For information, write to: Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500034, India.

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PITTA



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Donations to the Society are exempt from tax u/s 80G(5)(vi) of I.T. Act, 1961.

Field Outings

Sunday, 27-xi-2005: Shamirpet Deer Park and Lake, Medak District

Route Secunderabad Club – Trimulgherry. The Deer Park should provide an abundance of small woodland birds, while the lake should have at least a few waterfowl on it by this time. The rocks around the lake used to attract Peregrine Falcons but that was a long time ago and it is unlikely that this noble bird will be seen here now. But there should be some ducks like Pintail and Spotbills, provided that there is sufficient water in the lake. Look for Flycatchers and Warblers in the Deer Park. This will be a half-day trip. Carry water and snacks. For further details contact **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (3093 6937)** or **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)**.

Indoor Meeting

Monday, 21-xi-2005; 6.30 p.m.: Vidyaranya School, Opp. Secretariat, Saifabad

Audio-visual presentation on The Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of Species: By Humayun Taher

For further details contact **Mr. Shafaat Ulla (2335 3098)** or **Mr. Siraj A. Taher (5561 2608)**

EDITORIAL

Society News – or the lack of it.

Sadly, it seems that the woeful conditions with regard to the Society news continue unchanged. Why is it that people are so hesitant to submit notes to the Pitta. I have said earlier in this column that the job of making the writers' efforts more professional is for the editor. But the editors cannot create the news events, that the members attend. This activity is in the hands of the members. I believe that there was a fair turnout for the Society field trip in October to Narsapur. And yet, no-one has thought it worthwhile to just pen down what happened on that day and send it in for inclusion. You may think that nothing worthwhile happened, or that none of the sightings were interesting. But if you do not report, then that will certainly be the case; whereas if you do report, it could happen that a few years down the line, there would be some data hidden in this report that would be worth talking about. Believe me, it has happened before and it could well happen again.

Fine, so the editor has no better things to do than to keep firing sarcasm at the readers for not writing. Believe me, the editor is definitely NOT wanting to be sarcastic. It is merely a strong appeal to the members that it reflects very poorly on the Society if we cannot even produce a newsletter that is all contributed to by the members. It is easy enough these days to get a whole book of stories from the internet and put them into Pitta. But where does that get us; it reduces the newsletter from the status of a NEWSLETTER to a mere Compilation of news that is not even strictly relevant to our area.

Is anyone out there listening? And willing to take steps to correct this state of affairs? And if anyone wants pointers on the "Art of Writing", invest in a copy of "The Common Birds of Bombay" by EHA. That will give you more lessons in the art of natural history writing than any textbook on the subject. Gerald Durrell too, would be wonderful for this purpose and he would probably be more readily available at the bookstores

than EHA. And if you can get hold of any of Lawrence Durrell's literary efforts - well, nothing else can even begin to compare.

So, who's going to be my first contributor to the news columns next month?

Column: Urban Birding

By The City BirdBrain

With the advent of the winters, several species of urban and suburban birds begin to bestir themselves and think longing thoughts of house and hearth. Along with this thought comes an awakening of the courtship instincts and, simultaneously, all the males burst into spontaneous song, in the time-honoured tradition of birds to acquire a mate and so procreate and continue the species. One of the first species to get into the act is that rather comical little fellow, the Spotted Munia. Very diminutive are they, but very vocal and, as they seem to be thrusting their attention on me through their loud trilling from the balcony - to remind me that there is a shortage of grain in the buffet tray - we will hasten first to charge the tray with grain and so to tell of Spotted Munias at the same time.

Despite their small size, these birds are extremely visible. We see them in places as diverse as the woodlands and, as like as not, in the farms where they forgather with their numerous other cousins and do battle on the grain crops; to the consternation and wrath of the farmer and the grain merchant alike. And they are equally at home in urban gardens or, as in my case, in the shelter of the balcony, in close attendance to the grain tray!

The appearance of these birds is distinctly pleasing to the eye: What with the scales on the breast and the chocolate brown plumage - both the hen and the cock sharing the same clothes - the pair cuts a natty figure against a backdrop of grey wall and green foliage. And coupled with this is the fact that they have very pleasant voices also. Not that they have a great repertoire, or that the song they sing is very pleasant; but what sounds they do produce are quite refreshing - mostly little twitters and cheeps as the hen and the cock lovingly peck at each others' faces and indulge in a little communal grooming.

In the old days, when we used to keep quantities of cage birds of the budgerigar and parakeet kind, Munias too were favoured for the cages; on account of their pleasant plumage and their cheerful twittering and trilling. EHA, one of the most interesting authors of British East India, has also commented on the cheerfulness produced by having a cageful of Munias in the veranda of the house. So far as I can remember, our birds were housed in a large cage some distance from the veranda, but their soundbox was loud enough for their twittering to carry to the said part of the house and that was sufficient to create a cheerful feeling in the house.

Though I confess to a sense of shame when I say this, there was a time when I used to use these birds as bait for catching hawks and falcons. I had a couple of them in a small wire cage to which were attached considerable number of nooses, and, when the hawk came to try and catch the birds, it invariably snared itself before it could do any damage to the birds

themselves. In fact, though I managed to catch 6 Kestrels in a single day once, not once was any of the Munias so much as scratched, though there were two Spotted and two White-throated in the cage. The gaps in the cage grill were just too small to allow the hawk to get its talons into the cage and catch them. What is interesting is that the birds did not die of shock - it speaks much about their hardiness.

A pair of Spotted Munias has been visiting the balcony food tray regularly. They generally arrive late in the evenings and hop around the balcony in the company of the Sparrows that are now swarming in impressive numbers to the balcony. They lend a certain amount of colour to the scene as they hop around, chirping cheerfully. The steam that rises from my teacup fascinates the hen. She has several times tried to stick her face into the cup to ascertain exactly what this strange phenomenon might be. Each time she tries, she gets a puff of hot steam in her nose which causes her to sneeze with some violence but, nothing daunted, she tries again once the sneezing fit is over. Her husband is a trifle better behaved and less curious, or perhaps more cautious - though it is interesting and touching to see how anxiously he looks towards his wife as she performs her curious antics with the steam, what appears to him to be dangerously close to my legs. Occasionally, I fancy that there is a reproachful look in his little black eyes and a faintly accusing note in his twittering - but this could be due to the over-active imagination that I rejoice in!

I remember seeing a pair of these birds attempting to build their nest in Chilkur deer park once. The pair had selected a small ashoka tree near the Environmental Education Centre for the purpose and they busily flew to and fro, carrying twigs, leaves and little bits of straw. We did a bit of work with stopwatch and binoculars at that time and discovered that the birds averaged one visit per minute to the nest. Based on this, of course, it was obvious that they added 60 twigs per minute to the nest being constructed. Further research would have involved pulling the nest to pieces and ascertaining how many hours the birds took to complete it. We were resolved to go back one day and collect the nest once the birds were through with it, but somehow this did not happen, and when next we saw the nest, it was again in use by the birds - an observation that prompts the question as to whether these birds are in the habit of reusing old nest sites. I personally feel that the nest was a secure place and there was little or no interruption so the birds found it convenient to re-use the nest.

What with the fact that the cook has stopped drying the grain outside, and that the housewife prefers to get her rice directly from the supermarket which obviates the necessity of cleaning it, the birds have less to attract them to urban gardens now than they previously had. Which brings us back to the question of whether they deserve the tag of urban birds at all

these days. They seem to be hanging on for now at least – considering that the balcony is playing host to one pair at least, with a second occasionally visiting. So keep those eyes peeled this month for small birds in chocolate coating, and the

ears open for excited twittering and you are bound to see one or two of these little chaps. Keep watching the Spotted Munias this month. Until next time – Happy Birding!

INDOOR MEETING - EVOLUTION Presentation Material

By Humayun Taher

This is the first attempt we are making at trying to make the Indoor Meetings more interactive. To this end, we are publishing a short write-up that is pertinent to the topic that would be discussed in the meeting. Hopefully, this would encourage members to attend the meetings and to be more proactive in the discussions. Please bring this issue of Pitta with you when you attend the Indoor Meeting of the Society on 21st November. The presentation would complement the notes given below.

The Darwinian Theory of the Evolution of the Species

In its simplest form, evolution means to change appearance and habits to suit the environment in which one finds himself.

Generally speaking, evolution means the cumulative change in characteristics of organisms, occurring through long series of generations. This process accounts for the origin of all extant organisms on earth.

Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) published *On The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859. This book outlined the theory that the animals which exist today evolved from earlier, different species. This theory was based on three central observations. Firstly, all members within a species vary in some way. Some are taller than their fellows, some will be faster and so on. Secondly, most creatures produce large number of offspring – far more than will survive to become breeding adults. Thirdly, the total number in a particular species tends to remain more or less constant.

The very first species to appear on the face of the planet were monocellate plants, such as algae and fungi. These gradually evolved into the most complex organisms with which the earth is now populated.

When plants evolved, the earth was comparatively young and had a large concentration of Carbon dioxide in its atmosphere. This suited the plants which used this gas for respiration. So the plants evolved in many different ways and started to use the Carbon dioxide for their biological function, giving out, as a by-product, Oxygen. Considering that the atmosphere now started to hold considerably amounts of this gas, new evolving life-forms had to develop in a way where this gas could be used by them for some function. Therefore, life on earth evolved in a manner which allowed the use of Oxygen for the basic function of life, viz. breathing. As a by-product of this, they gave out Carbon dioxide, thus causing a full circle of usage. The plants used the Carbon dioxide given out by the animals using the Oxygen given out by plants . . .

- ➊ The origins of life: Life probably began among the collection of chemicals in the primeval seas; from simple, single-celled organisms the whole of the present animal kingdom evolved.
- ➋ The first stage: The story of evolution is one of ever-increasing complexity and specialisation – of progress from single-celled animals to complex creatures with billions of cells.
- ➌ Arthropods: Out of more than a million known species of living animals, three-quarters are arthropods – perhaps the most adaptable and successful animals in the history of the planet.
- ➍ Fish: For over 400 million years, fish have been among the most dominant life-forms on earth. Considering that over 70% of the earth's surface is covered in water, this is not so surprising. Also, the seas contain a considerable array of habitats which was used by fish to evolve in ways in which they could be colonised. Even in the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean, there is life, evolved to live in the stygian darkness and enormous water pressure.
- ➎ Amphibians: A group of fish broke away from the main evolution stream and developed lungs, strengthened skeletal frames and flippers evolved to become limbs. These evolved into amphibians, the first ever vertebrates to colonise the land area of the earth.
- ➏ Reptiles: By developing waterproof skins and ability to lay shelled eggs, some amphibians evolved into reptiles. They were able to invade dry land and travel long distances away from water if required. These creatures were among the most successful animals ever to populate the earth.
- ➐ Dinosaurs: The word, meaning "Terrible Lizards" very aptly describes one of the most successful group of animals ever to walk the earth. For over 150 million years these giant reptiles ruled the earth; and evolved into a bewildering array of creatures, from the 1½ foot *Mussaurus*, to the huge 50 feet *Tyrannosaurus* and the 80 feet *Brontosaurus*.

④ Birds: One branch of the reptiles evolved into birds. Originally feathers were probably evolved from scales as a form of insulation and temperature control. The evolution of feathers led to flight. It is possible that the first birds were not very good fliers. *Archaeopteryx* is assumed to be a very weak flyer and probably only took wing when seriously threatened.

⑤ Mammals: Although reptiles were the first vertebrates to conquer the land completely, their cold-blooded bodies could not adapt to all environments, particularly the Polar Regions. Warm-blooded mammals then evolved to fill in these niches, and now mammals

cover almost all the regions and habitats that the earth has to offer, from the tropical areas to the polar regions, from the fresh-water lakes to the seas, from the highest mountains to the plains.

Primates: Starting around 65 million years ago, a small group of mammals evolved with large brains and dexterous hands; these are the early primates which culminated in monkeys, apes and ultimately, about 400,000 years ago, into modern man, *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

BIRD OF THE MONTH

THE SPOTBILL DUCK (*Anas poecilorhyncha*)

The **Spotbill Duck** (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) is one of our larger ducks and one of only a few resident species. They will be seen throughout the year on small and large jheels, lakes and reservoirs. Of recent years, they have also moved into the city and are seen in parks and gardens which have waterbodies in or around them. The public park on Banjara Hills Road No. 1 (Vengalarao Park) is a good example, which has a family of these birds in residence. The plumage is mostly brown and grey, with a white and metallic green speculum. The most prominent feature is the dark bill, tipped with yellow and with two dark orange spots at the base; one on each side of the forehead. This is a distinctive feature and one which gives the bird its name.



The birds are found throughout the Indian Union, including the Andamans and also in the neighbouring countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. There seems to be some local movement throughout its range, but this is not authenticated. Three races have been identified, but only the typical race concerns us here in Southern India.

In the days when *Shikar* was legal, this bird was a favourite for the table. This could have been because of its resident habits and the fact that it could be got even in the non-migratory season. The old man tells of the days of his youth, when this bird was a frequent star in the kitchens! In view of this, the species is most wary and very difficult to stalk up to, even to this day. An interesting example of adaptation enduring even when the prime cause no longer endures.

The birds build with us here, the main season being during the South-West Monsoon (July to September). There is a record by the BSAP of a nest in Chilkur, by the side of a small path, close to a small natural pond. Generally, the nest is a pad of grass and weeds on the marshy margins of tanks and lakes. There are records of young birds from Nehru Zoological Park and other places around the city. It is not unlikely that the birds nest in the Zoo, because there is an abundance of favoured habitat around the large lake near the Lion Safari Park.

At the same time, there is considerable persecution of these birds throughout the year. I recollect seeing them for sale at Sunday bazaars in the livestock section and there are generally one or two in the shops at the Chowk Bird Market. It seems that their reputation as good table birds still precedes them and, being resident, they are to be had throughout the year. It is high time that the birds are given the protection that they deserve. And I think it is time that we too resorted to the old formula being used by Animal Planet that "When the Buying stops, the killing will too."

For Private Circulation Only

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SÁLIM ALI CENTRE FOR ORNITHOLOGY AND NATURAL HISTORY

(An autonomous centre aided by the Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India)

**Dr (Mrs) Lalitha Vijayan
Director-in-charge**

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18 August 2005

To all members of the SACON Society

Dear Sir

Kindly recall our letter dated 27 July 2005 on the 15th Annual General Meeting (AGM) and an Extraordinary General Meeting of the SACON Society scheduled at 3.00 pm and 4.30 pm respectively on 30 August 2005 at Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Anaikatty, Coimbatore - 641 108 (Tamil Nadu).

I am enclosing the agenda notes for the above meetings. Kindly make it convenient to attend the meetings. We would very much appreciate if you could kindly let us know your itinerary so that local arrangements could be made accordingly.

Thanking you

Yours faithfully


**Lalitha Vijayan
Member Secretary**

Encl: as above.

1. AGM and EGM Agenda
2. Annual Report : 2004-2005
3. Audited Accounts : 2004-2005

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